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Athabasca River at Risk

Despite good progress by a multi-stakeholder group in understanding issues around Athabasca River water withdrawals, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is concerned there will still not be protective water rules for low winter flows. AWA believes oilsands mine river withdrawals must cease during low winter flows.

“Intensive oilsands development is proceeding along the Athabasca, profoundly affecting its wetlands, surface water and ground water”, says AWA Conservation Specialist Carolyn Campbell. “We must do more to protect this river, one of Alberta’s great ecological treasures.”

Flowing north of Fort McMurray, the Lower Athabasca River provides habitat for 31 species of fish - half the total fish species found in Alberta – and terminates at the Athabasca Delta, an internationally significant wetlands area for migratory birds. The river is already suffering from ongoing loss of tributary streams used for fish spawning and rearing habitat, and cumulative water quality effects from toxic air emission deposits, spills and tailings leakage. Meanwhile, our knowledge of its aquatic ecosystem, especially in winter ice-covered conditions, is still very limited.

AWA was a member of the recently-concluded Lower Athabasca multi-stakeholder committee to recommend long-term or ‘Phase 2’ management rules for oilsands river water withdrawals by Alberta Environment and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. “Even though the committee did not reach agreement on withdrawal rules, this was a valuable process that should be a model for managing other Alberta rivers,” says Campbell. “Although more research is required, a lot of resources were devoted to improving knowledge about how oilsands withdrawals will affect river flows during the winter, when flows are already at their lowest, and how that will affect fish species.” The Committee reached agreement on major implementation issues: legal certainty, notification and compliance reporting, priority topics for more research, and monitoring principles. This is a significant achievement, and a good basis for regulators to commence a year-long consultation period with First Nations and the public.

AWA calls on the Alberta and federal governments to:

- regulate oilsands mines to completely cease their river water withdrawals during low winter flows, when the aquatic ecosystem is already under most stress
- reduce mining water demand through requiring deferred production and water conservation measures, rather than through adding off-stream storage supply
- address other acute and chronic risk factors degrading the Athabasca watershed by reducing current oilsands industry impacts and raising reclamation requirements

The report is available on AWA’s website at <http://www.albertawilderness.ca/issues/wildwater/archive>

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