



Suffield National Wildlife Area – Conservation Makes Economic Sense

Calgary (March 12, 2010) – As shale gas discoveries greatly expand already abundant reserves of natural gas, the economics of EnCana’s application to drill an additional 1,275 gas wells within Suffield National Wildlife Area are becoming ever more questionable. The Suffield Coalition has long argued that it would be economically imprudent and not in the public interest to approve EnCana’s application. In June, EnCana announced it was shutting in gas wells because of low demand and prices, so the time may be just right for EnCana to abandon further drilling within Suffield National Wildlife Area.

In North America, proven reserves of natural gas have increased substantially in the past two years. A 2009 study from the National Energy Board predicts increases in unconventional gas supply will near 55% by 2020, and U.S. natural gas reserve estimates have increased by 27% since 2004. Estimates of technically recoverable natural gas (including undiscovered reserves) have increased even more dramatically. The enormous potential for shale gas has contributed to a significant decline in the price of natural gas in the past year and the Energy Information Agency predicts that the price of gas will remain way under the July 2008 peak until 2030.

EnCana’s arguments in their 2007 Environmental Impact Statement implied that if they don’t drill in the Suffield National Wildlife Area, the gas that isn’t produced from the National Wildlife Area will probably have to come from landscapes with equal environmental sensitivity. “Even if we agreed –and we don’t– that the proposed drilling would recover significant additional gas, rather than serve primarily to speed up recovery, this was highly implausible then and is even more so since the shale gas discoveries,” says Carla Sbert of Nature Canada. “Our need for natural gas is not so great and the supply so limited that we have no alternative but to invade national or international ecological reserves to obtain it.”

The ecological goods and services provided by Suffield National Wildlife Area –like clean air, fresh water, pollination and biodiversity–are more valuable to Canadians than the gas EnCana wishes to speedily extract to the area’s detriment. “We all rely on these ecological goods and services for life itself,” said Sandra Foss of Federation of Alberta Naturalists, “but they are still generally not considered part of the cost of doing business and are external to markets; we tend to take them for granted because they are part of ‘the commons’. However, in the end we, the people of Canada, will all pay for their loss.”

In the case of Suffield–whose native prairie ecosystem is representative of one of the most threatened natural systems on the continent–there is little doubt that the goods and services provided by the region will be compromised if EnCana’s project is approved. Natural grasslands, for example, are important for their carbon storage capacity and modifying those grasslands can be a significant source of carbon emissions. Native prairie landscapes are also important for pollination, genetic resources and have critical



ecosystem and watershed values, particularly in the case of the Suffield National Wildlife Area, whose eastern boundary is one of Alberta's major rivers.

Specific externalities paid for by taxpayers include long-term liability for abandoned wells, negative wildlife impacts, improper reclamation of disturbed areas, proliferation of invasive plants, air pollution, and a general degradation of ecosystem integrity.

There are many alternatives to the Suffield National Wildlife Area's natural gas that EnCana hopes to extract, including increased efficiency of use, but the biodiversity of the National Wildlife Area has no substitute, and natural carbon and watershed services are becoming ever rarer in Alberta's overdeveloped landscape. "The National Wildlife Area's value to Canadians as a wildlife and ecosystem refuge far exceeds the value of the gas," says Alberta Wilderness Association's Cliff Wallis. "As we continue to await a decision by the Government of Canada to deny approval to the project, we hope EnCana is coming to realize that it is economically irrational to degrade a unique and valuable asset in pursuit of a commodity that is common and plentiful."

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The Suffield Coalition comprises seven groups: Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, World Wildlife Fund Canada, Nature Saskatchewan, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, Grasslands Naturalists, and Nature Canada.