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GRIZZLY BEAR PROTECTION MISSING FROM LATEST ERCB DECISION

The latest decision by Alberta's Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) perpetuates the conditions that are threatening Alberta's grizzly bear population, says Alberta's environmental organizations.

"With the bears now designated as Threatened, new ways of doing business in grizzly bear habitat are urgently needed to reduce the greatest threats to their survival – interactions with people caused by a proliferation of industrial access roads," says Wendy Francis, Director of Conservation for the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative. "Unfortunately, the ERCB's decision to approve Petro-Canada's application for 11 new gas wells and associated infrastructure in Sullivan Creek will increase the threats to bears and the likelihood of bears dying at the hands of people," she adds.

The ERCB announced its conditional approval of the project on June 8th. In its application, Petro-Canada acknowledged that there would be negative impacts on bears and bear mortality as a consequence of the project. The ERCB concludes that Petro-Canada "may have understated the risk to the regional grizzly bear population."

In order to address the risks to bears, the ERCB recommends "aggressive" access management on the part of Petro-Canada, enforced by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be enough to protect bears.

"Proper access management requires that access roads not only be gated but also that there are regular inspections and security patrols and strict enforcement by provincial staff," notes Nigel Douglas, Conservation Specialist with the Alberta Wilderness Association. "The province does not have the personnel on the ground to provide the kind of intensive oversight that is necessary to ensure that access roads remain closed. In fact, there is ample evidence that access management is ineffective in preventing determined individuals from taking their vehicles onto industrial roads," he adds.

"What's needed is a complete overhaul of the decision-making process for industrial access on Alberta's public lands in grizzly bear habitat that ensures that there is no net increase in road densities," states Sarah Elmeli, Senior Conservation Planner for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society- Southern Alberta Chapter. "Case-by-case decisions like this one not only do not adequately account for impacts to grizzly bear habitat, but actually increase risks to bears. We need to change how these decisions are made if we are going to recover grizzlies," she adds.

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A copy of the ERCB's decision is available here: <http://www.ercb.ca/docs/documents/decisions/2010/2010-022.pdf>