

Alberta Oil Leaks: How Much is a Dead Bird Worth?

In November 2010, Harvest Operations Corporation was fined \$125,000 for a 2008 leak of approximately 14,500 litres of crude oil which killed at least 300 birds in the southwest corner of Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield, approximately 48km from the CFB Suffield National Wildlife Area. The spill, from an 'abandoned' well site, affected 1,200 square metres of land and was estimated to have been leaking for three months before it was detected. There are more than 45,000 wells in Alberta which have been abandoned but not certified; as the Globe and Mail pointed out in a September 2008 editorial, with only 100 Energy Resource Conservation Board Inspectors for 164,000 active wells in the province, "the agency necessarily relies on oil and gas companies to regulate their own operations." Clearly this self-regulation is not working very well.

The dead birds included, according to Environment Canada, migratory birds, songbirds and raptors. The provincial court fine worked out at just over \$400 per dead bird discovered (presumably a number of birds which died over the previous three months were not recorded). Seemingly these birds were adjudged to be worth less than the 1,600 ducks killed on the Syncrude tailings ponds, which resulted in a \$3 million fine (nearly \$2,000 per bird).

- Nigel Douglas

Bill 29: People Power Does Work, Part 2

Albertans really do care about their parks! This is the key message from an extraordinary few weeks, which saw Albertans in their thousands speak out loud and clear in opposition to proposed legislation which would have watered down protection of our provincial parks.

Bill 29, the proposed *Alberta Parks Act*, had already passed first reading in the legislature when a concerted campaign by AWA and other environmental organizations finally brought it to the attention of the public. AWA strongly believed that the bill, as it stood, could have been the biggest set-back in parks management in Alberta in a decade.

Around 4.2 percent of Alberta is protected provincially. This wonderful and diverse network includes everything from small campground Provincial Recreation Areas to the huge and magnificent Wilderness Areas such as the White Goat and Siffleur. This diversity is currently reflected in a number of different protected area designations, each with a different focus. Wilderness Areas protect large unspoiled tracts of wilderness; Ecological Reserves protect scientific benchmarks; Provincial Parks balance ecological integrity with recreation opportunities.

The proposed *Alberta Parks Act* would have thrown out all of the existing legislation (with the exception of the *Willmore Wilderness Act*). In future, all parks and protected areas were to be classified as either Heritage Rangelands (for grazing) or Provincial Parks (for a 'balance' of conservation and recreation). The huge 445 sq. km White Goat Wilderness Area would have been downgraded, leaving it with the same level of protection as the parking lot and trails at Elbow Falls. While the current

legislation specifies that certain activities – including hunting and motorized access – are prohibited in Wilderness Areas, this certainty was removed in the proposed new act. Within the new cover-all Provincial Park designation, it was suggested that there would be four 'zones'; these zones would allow for differing focus on conservation or recreation, though this was never specified in the legislation. What would or would not be allowed in any of these zones was not defined.

The proposed legislation would also have made it easier for the government to change park designations in future, or to allow new 'dispositions' such as industrial access or motorized recreation. Currently this can only be done with changes in legislation; in future, Cabinet would have made changes on its own. Public 'comment' could have been required, but not public consultation.

AWA argued that this proposed legislation was so bad, and so fundamentally flawed, that it could not go ahead as it stood, and Albertans agreed. Hundreds of AWA supporters wrote and phoned their politicians to try to ensure that the proposed legislation did not slip through without substantial changes, and on November 24, we were greeted with the news that Bill 29 had been withdrawn, at least until the spring.

Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation, Cindy Ady, promised that her ministry would go away and consult with Albertans before reintroducing the bill in the spring, so it will be important for Albertans to follow developments closely. But in the meantime, we can celebrate the growing realization that, when enough people take the time to speak out loudly and clearly, then we can indeed make a difference in Alberta.

- Nigel Douglas

Protection of Alberta's spectacular Wilderness Areas, such as the White Goat, would have been severely curtailed if the proposed Alberta Parks Act was passed.

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