



ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

Energy Resources Conservation Board
Resources Applications Group
Spacing Framework Review
Suite 1000, 250 – 5 Street SW
Calgary, Alberta T2P 0R4

January 18, 2011

Dear Sir/ Madam

Re: Feedback on Province-Wide Framework for Well Spacing for Conventional and Unconventional Oil and Gas Reservoirs

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) was recently forwarded a document, ERCB's Bulletin 2010-39, *Invitation for Feedback on Province-Wide Framework for Well Spacing for Conventional and Unconventional Oil and Gas Reservoirs*. For such a significant document, which could have considerable widespread impacts on the future landscape of Alberta, AWA is concerned that the consultation process seems to be so meagre. AWA can find no record of a request from ERCB for our participation in this process, and yet our interest in this matter must be well known to ERCB.

According to Bulletin 2010-39, ERCB is seeking "stakeholder input" but there is no suggestions that any sort of public input is being sought, though the Alberta public clearly has a right to a say on this matter, particularly where it relates to public lands.

AWA opposes any moves by ERCB to increase well densities, or streamline the process for increasing well densities, in Alberta. ERCB has made no effort to balance the increases in convenience for oil and gas companies with the serious negative impacts which such an increase could produce. As well densities increase, so the development footprint increases (including access roads). The effects of increasing footprint have been widely documented, from the effects on increasing grizzly bear mortality to the imminent disappearance of sage-grouse from Alberta. Basic economic theory would suggest that analyzing the benefits of a particular course of action while making no attempt to analyze the costs is a fundamentally flawed approach.

AWA's opposition to increased well spacing is based on a number of factors.

Need for Increased well Spacing

The unexplained assumption behind ERCB's proposals to increase well spacing for conventional and unconventional oil and gas reservoirs seems to be that it is in the public interest for Albertans for the oil industry to get the oil or gas out of the ground as fast as is humanly possible, and that this purpose should take precedence over any other considerations. The explained "rationale" behind each proposal does little more than explain why the oil and gas industry might wish that the changes should be made. It gives no indication that any other factors have been considered in any way. How would these changes affect wildlife habitat? How would they affect endangered species populations? How would they affect management of native grasslands? In what way is it to the benefit of Albertans for this public resource to be extracted as rapidly as possible with no consideration of the possible negative impacts? Are the changes in the public interest?

Endangered Species

Nowhere in ERCB's Bulletin 2010-39 is there any suggestion that the impacts of increased well spacing on endangered species in Alberta's grasslands have been adequately considered. Numerous provincial and federal status reports for a wide range of species from burrowing owls to swift foxes to ferruginous hawks, identify increased oil and gas development activity as a factor contributing to species decline.

Alberta is on the cusp of eliminating greater sage-grouse from the province. Mark Boyce, a highly respected University of Alberta scientist, recently commented "This will be the first case where the oil and gas industry has caused the extirpation of a species from Alberta." It is clear that ERCB is already failing to consider factors other than getting the resource out of the ground as quickly as is humanly possible.

Environmentally Significant Areas

There is no indication that ERCB has taken into account the 2009 Environmentally Significant Areas maps produced by the Alberta government, which identify large portions of the land in question as *Nationally Environmentally Significant*.

Fescue grasslands

The proposed well spacing changes ignore any considerations about the possible impact on native grasslands. This is in flagrant contrast to ERCB's principles as laid out in its own 2002 document, *Principles for Minimizing Surface Disturbance in Native Prairie and Parkland Areas*. ERCB, in these guidelines, recognizes that "grasslands are considered to be the world's single most threatened ecosystem," and stresses the importance of planning to minimize possible impacts. "It cannot be overemphasized that project planning should take into account the whole development and consider the timing and location of activity. Applicants should try not to locate development activities in native prairie or parkland landscapes wherever possible." And yet Bulletin 2010-39 appears to entirely ignore these stated principles in a rush to drill more wells and extract the resource as quickly as possible.

Alberta's sustainable ranching community is dependent upon sensitive management of these fescue grasslands, and so increased well spacing is likely to be an unfair burden on an already beleaguered community.

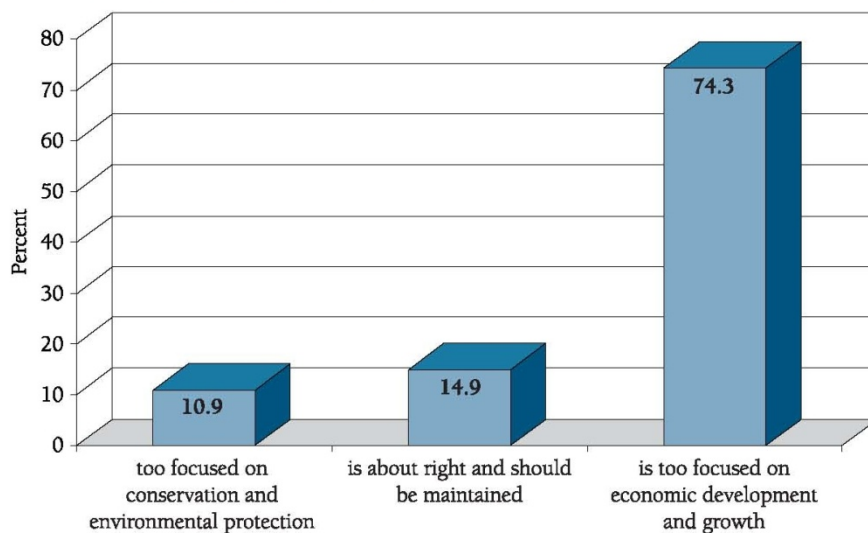
Land-use Framework

Reading Bulletin 2010-39, and ERCB's proposed changes, it would be easy to imagine that the province had never been through the extensive, drawn-out Land-use Framework process. The Alberta government's recognition that "We have reached a tipping point, where sticking with the old rules will not produce the quality of life we have come to expect" (*Land-Use Framework*, December 2008) might never have happened. When the *Land-Use Framework* stated that "If we want our children to enjoy the same quality of life that current generations have, we need a new plan," facilitating a hugely increased industrial footprint is clearly not what was intended.

Bulletin 2010-39 appears to work entirely at odds with all of the principles of the provincial government's Land-Use Framework.

For example, the provincial government's October 2007 *Land-use Framework Workbook Summary Report* made it abundantly clear that the priority of Albertans was **not** on economic growth and development:

Figure 4: At present, the balance between developing and using our land versus conservation of our land is...



*Appendix 1 provides a breakdown of 'n' values showing response and non-response (n=2602)

The Regional Advisory Council for the South Saskatchewan Region has been meeting for the past two years to put together its recommendations for a regional plan to govern future land-use planning throughout the South Saskatchewan region. It is entirely inappropriate for ERCB to make isolated land-use planning decisions such as those outlined in Bulletin 2010-39 before the regional plan has been produced.

Cumulative effects

The Land-Use Framework identified the need to plan for managing the cumulative impacts of numerous different activities on the same landscape. ERCB's Bulletin 2010-39 seemingly ignores this policy direction of the Alberta government.

Wetlands and Groundwater

There is no indication that ERCB has considered Wetlands and Groundwater in its proposals to increase well spacing. This is a serious and worrying oversight.

AWA believes that the proposals laid out in ERCB's Bulletin 2010-39 must not go ahead. The proposals represent a resounding failure to take into account any interests other than those of the resource extraction industry. At a time when the Alberta government is increasingly recognizing, through its Land-Use Framework process, that there is a need to do much better job of managing the many and varied cumulative impacts of different activities on a finite land base, these proposals seem to represent a giant step backwards. AWA does not believe that such changes would be in any way in the public interest.

Yours truly

ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'NDG', is positioned to the right of the typed name.

Nigel Douglas,
Conservation Specialist

cc: Hon. Ron Liepert, Minister of Energy
cc: Dr. David Swann, Leader Alberta Liberals
cc: Brian Mason, Leader Alberta NDP party
cc: Paul Hinman, Wild Rose Alliance