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Alberta Pipeline Safety Inadequate for Water Bodies

The Alberta government today released a report that it received in December 2012 recommending safety improvements in Alberta's pipeline system. Key findings include a need for better management of water body crossings, stronger inspection and testing requirements in high risk areas, and stronger audit and enforcement capacity by the energy regulator. While reserving judgment on the report's call for a more management-system-based approach, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) calls for swift implementation of the water body, inspection and regulator capacity recommendations.

"This report confirms that for water bodies and regulatory capacity, Alberta is not doing enough to ensure the environmental and public health risks posed by pipelines are being managed," said Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist with AWA.

Specific report recommendations that AWA supports include: requiring companies to undertake twenty times finer-scaled mapping of water crossings; mandatory inspection of pipeline 'depth of cover' below water for high risk water crossings; minimum pipeline condition inspection standards for high-risk areas; external auditing of pipeline integrity programs; and that the energy regulator be staffed appropriately to enforce regulations.

"Given recent Alberta pipeline ruptures, we believe that more pro-active measures are also called for, such as reducing incidences of shallow-buried older pipelines at water crossings and reducing shutoff valve spacing," said Campbell.

Forty percent of Alberta's pipeline system was built before 1990. Areas of particular vulnerability are mountain and foothills headwaters, which provide much of our water supply as well as important aquatic and wildlife habitat. Many pipelines are buried below headwaters stream beds; these stream beds are scoured out during spring runoff or storms, which over time removes pipeline cover and exposes pipelines to fast-moving heavy debris.

This report covers pipelines under Alberta's jurisdiction. In terms of federal jurisdiction, a December 2011 report by Canada's federal commissioner of environment and sustainable development reported weak National Energy Board oversight amid increasing risk of accidents with an aging pipeline network. The report stated the NEB was not adequately monitoring companies' emergency procedures, and that the NEB was not following up to ensure corrective action when deficiencies were discovered. In July 2012 a US National Transportation Safety Board report investigating a major 2010 pipeline spill of diluted bitumen in Michigan concluded that Enbridge had "pervasive organizational failures" and criticized the pipeline companies' regulatory environment that emphasizes self-regulation.

For more information:

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Attachment: Recent Major Alberta Pipeline Ruptures





Recent Major Alberta Pipeline Ruptures

June 22, 2013: Enbridge pipeline spills up to 120,000 liters (750 barrels) of synthetic crude oil near Anzac into a wetland and lake.

June 21, 2013: PennWest Petroleum pipeline spills up to 600,000 liters (3800 barrels) of salty wastewater and oil into wetlands 20 km from the aboriginal community of Little Buffalo.

June 19, 2013: Legacy Oil and Gas sour gas pipeline ruptures in flood waters in Turner Valley. 50 homes near the pipeline are evacuated.

June 14, 2013: Plains Midstream Canada pipeline spills 150,000 liters (950 barrels) of liquid gas condensates northwest of Manning onto public lands.

June 1, 2013: Apache Canada wastewater pipeline spills 9.5 million liters (60,000 barrels) of contaminated wastewater southwest of Zama City (not northeast as originally reported) into 42 hectares of wetlands. The site is very close to the Zama River which flows into the RAMSAR internationally significant Hay-Zama Lakes wetland complex. There is no public notification of this spill until 11 days after it was discovered.

June 2012: Enbridge pumping station along a pipeline spills 230,000 liters (1400 barrels) of heavy crude oil southeast of Elk Point onto private lands.

June 2012: Plains Midstream Canada pipeline spills 500,000 liters (3000 barrels) of sour crude oil into upper Red Deer River via Jackson Creek, which contains threatened bull trout. The company was informed of their leak by other operators.

May 2012: Pace Oil & Gas pipeline spills 3.5 million liters (22,000 barrels) of an oil-water emulsion into 4 hectares of peat wetlands near Rainbow Lake. The company was informed of their leak by another company operating in the area.

July 2011: Pembina Pipelines pipeline spills 200,000 liters (1300 barrels) of crude oil north of Swan Hills onto land and into a creek.

April 2011: Plains Midstream Canada pipeline spills 4.5 million liters (28,000 barrels) of oil northeast of Peace River into surrounding boreal peat wetlands. The company took nearly 8 hours after detecting an unstable condition to determine that a leak had occurred. Shutoff valves nearest the rupture were 137 km apart.

