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Alberta Wetland Policy Exempts Oilsands Industry, Abandons No-Net-Loss in Prairies

The Alberta government's wetland policy announced today will exempt all approved and near-term foreseeable oilsands projects from wetland offsets or restoration. For prairie wetlands, the policy drops the current clear no-net-loss policy goal and exposes even the highest value unprotected wetlands to destruction. This policy will promote ongoing loss of wetlands that purify water, reduce flood and drought severity, and provide crucial wildlife habitat. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) calls on the Alberta government to strengthen the announced wetlands policy to better safeguard our water security and environment.

"Despite Albertans' strong support for a no-net-loss wetland policy, the announced policy caves in to unsustainable oilsands industry practices and is appalling news for Alberta's boreal forest," says Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. "Instead, a clear compensation policy should at least offset wetlands losses as they occur, in line with many other jurisdictions. As with the tailings ponds directives, existing projects should be brought into wetlands compliance at the 10 year license renewal stage."

Tar sands projects now stretch 100 kilometers on both sides of the Athabasca River, where several of North America's major migratory bird routes converge. The announced policy allows all current and near-term foreseeable oilsands projects to destroy the peat wetlands covering half the landscape, without current offsets, for a promise decades later to plant trees and small salt marshes that lack the water filtering and retention, carbon storage and habitat values of the destroyed wetlands. The announced policy also waives current offsets for significant decades-long "temporary" loss of wetland functions from seismic, forestry, peat mining, and new oil, gas, and in situ oilsands projects; it will only require compensation for 'permanent' losses such as permanent roads. "Given development pressures and the warming effects of climate change in Alberta's north, the absence of offsets for most wetland impacts is irresponsible management of Alberta's large boreal region," said Campbell.

For the prairies and parklands where most Albertans live, the announced policy drops the existing no-net-loss goal. It replaces a clear area-based system with a complex value-based rating system, and requires compensation for permanent but not temporary losses, each of which may be highly contested. It offers no mechanism to place Alberta's highest value unprotected wetlands off limits to development, instead setting a higher replacement ratio unlikely to result in avoidance in metropolitan or resource development areas. "The announced policy suggests that ongoing wetland losses in central and southern Alberta will continue," said Campbell. "Because of wetlands' high values for flood and drought reduction, groundwater recharge, water purification and wildlife, the Alberta government instead should set clear goals to halt ongoing loss across Alberta and require offsets for impacts lasting more than a year."

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