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Why Are They Giving Away Our Water?

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Government-appointed basin advisory committees (BAC) representing the South Saskatchewan River Basin (SSRB) have been deliberating for the past couple of years to arrive at recommendations for water conservation objectives (WCO) for water management plans for the four sub-basins of the SSRB. Three of the sub-basins – the lower reaches of the Bow River, the Oldman River (including the southern tributaries), and the South Saskatchewan River – have been over-allocated to varying degrees.

In recent Alberta Environment reports (SORAB and one by Cows and Fish), these rivers were diagnosed as being in part degraded, with some stretches even severely degraded, due to large water allocations, mostly to irrigation districts, the highest volume users. Only the Red Deer River is still in reasonably good shape and has sufficient flow left in the river for in-stream needs.

The advisory committees for the Bow, Oldman and South Saskatchewan Rivers struggled to find small flow increases to reverse the trends of past large abstractions; they are trying to conserve a bit more water for the aquatic environment, especially the riparian habitat. Despite the obvious lessons of past allocations without regard to river ecology, the BAC for the Red Deer River recommended to Alberta Environment to set the target for conservation very low – at only half the scientifically determined in-stream flow needs (IFN).

It is understandable that the municipalities in the Red Deer River sub-basin want to reserve sufficient water allocations for their future population and economic growth. But it seems that the reason behind this BAC recommendation may be a perceived need to reserve a sufficiently large allocation for the Special Areas Water Supply Project (SAWSP), a proposed huge Alberta government water scheme. The \$170 million scheme happens to be mostly in the riding of the provincial minister for agriculture. Based on the economic analysis of similar schemes, such as the Meridian Dam, it is unlikely that such a project would be economically feasible without large government subsidies.

The proposed scheme involves a huge pumping scheme (over 350 feet vertical lift) abstracting 20 to 30 per cent of the Red Deer River low flows this year near Stettler, a six-foot diameter pipeline, large canals and reservoirs, and irrigation of over 30,000 acres, including over 10,000 acres of backflooding. Although annual O&M costs of \$2 million and \$11 million annual benefits are suggested with a payback period of 15 years (but no details are given in the undated estimate on the Special Areas website), it is not shown how the local farmers will repay the large capital costs when even the annual O&M costs would add up to about \$40,000 per irrigated section of land.

How is it that some people refuse to learn from the past and don't use foresight when making decisions that will affect our environment in the long term? We cannot have special and still wild places – the Red Deer River flows through Dinosaur Provincial Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site – without healthy rivers running through them. This river is a resource that belongs to the entire province, and we should not let a short-sighted, government-appointed committee guided by local self-interest, and possibly serving vested interests, sign away a river's future health. The lower Bow, Oldman and South Saskatchewan Rivers with their dying cottonwood groves should be a lesson and a warning to all of us.

Government still has to formally decide on this potentially fateful recommendation, but unfortunately, there will be only a token public consultation later this year. Often these sessions are actually more information dissemination exercises, and Alberta Environment may have made their internal decision by then. The public was represented in the process through a broad range of selected stakeholders on the





BAC, but environmental interests were in the minority. There also was a brief consultation session with an expanded group of invited stakeholders earlier this year when these insights were gained. However, despite the potential long-term implications for a wide area, the public at large, including the media, have been virtually shut out of this process, which has been taking place behind closed doors.

