



Dear Wilderness Defender,

Important flood-risk management decisions are imminent in the Bow watershed, with long-term impacts to our rivers' natural ability to buffer floods and droughts, purify water and support important aquatic ecosystems. Please add your voice to request immediate disclosure of cost-benefit analyses for flood mega-projects, and to support 'Room for the River' solutions that strengthen river ecosystems and move vulnerable infrastructure and homes in low density areas off flood plains.
- Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist

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River' Pilot

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The Issue

The Alberta government may decide in the next few weeks whether to proceed with design and environmental assessments for a headwaters dam in Kananaskis Country on the Elbow River; it has not yet released its cost-benefit analysis or first-cut environmental analysis of this dam. Meanwhile, a positive, more ecologically-based pilot project called 'Room for the River' is in danger of being shut down; public comments are needed on the 'Room for the River' pilot by January 31.

Background

The proposed Elbow River dam upstream of McLean Creek (also called the McLean Creek site, or MC1) will have major ecological impacts upstream and downstream even if never used in a 'flood'. The 'dry dam' description is misleading: a 19 meter high permanent barrier and a permanent reservoir are proposed. A much larger gate, creating a larger reservoir, will be used for undetermined higher flows.

The food web in the upper Elbow, like other Alberta mountain headwaters, relies on organic debris that enters from land runoff, is trapped by log jams and rocks, and is processed by bacteria, fungi and aquatic insects. The steeper grades move sediment downstream and scour stream beds, which among other benefits provide the threatened bull trout population in that area with clean gravels to aerate their incubating eggs. Dam reservoirs replace productive flowing river and riverside habitat with less productive silty, standing water. They also block movement of materials downstream and movement of fish and other organisms upstream and downstream. Relying on dams in order to retain and build more vulnerable floodplain settlements and infrastructure increases the risk of catastrophic consequences from large storm events that overtop dams.

Our best information is the Alberta government will likely decide in February whether to proceed with design and environmental assessments for the Elbow McLean dam. Cost-benefit analyses have been prepared for this and two other proposed flood mega-projects (Springbank diversion and Glenmore reservoir's tunnel-to-the-Bow). The government should be transparent about these high-cost projects and release these analyses ahead of its decision.

'Room for the River' is an approach now used by the Dutch government, recognizing their historic over-reliance on engineering to avert flood risk. 'Room for the River' principles generally seek to: make more room in the flood plain for flood waters to disperse or be channeled; move back vulnerable buildings and other infrastructure from rivers; restore natural flood and drought resilient wetlands and river-side vegetation; minimize reliance on berming river edges and on costly dams subject to catastrophic failure. AWA believes this is the wisest flood-proofing and drought-proofing approach, especially in lower density urban communities and rural areas. The comment period ends on January 31 for a report outlining 'Room for the River' pilot project ideas on the Bow and Elbow River mainstems from the headwaters to Calgary. A copy of this report is [here](#).

A copy of AWA's letter to Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) Minister Fawcett is [here](#).

Take Action

Please write ESRD Minister Kyle Fawcett, ESRD.Minister@gov.ab.ca :

- Ask for immediate disclosure of cost-benefit analyses ahead of the Alberta government's decision to proceed further with the Elbow McLean dam and other flood-related mega-projects
- Oppose the Elbow McLean dam in Kananaskis Country as hugely costly, prone to catastrophic failure, and damaging to important headwaters ecology
- Support the 'Room for the River' Bow-Elbow pilot project ideas, including expanded buyouts of properties in high hazard areas. The pilot will help make more room in the flood plain to disperse flood waters in lower density areas, restore flood and drought resilient wetlands and river-side vegetation, and minimize reliance on ecologically harmful river berms and dams.

Please copy info@albertawatersmart.com on any 'Room for the River' comments, by January 31.

And please copy AWA at ccampbell@abwild.ca on your correspondence.
Thank you for defending our vital rivers!

Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action