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Government plan fails to protect lower Athabasca River when most needed

New water management framework leaves river exposed to unacceptable risk

EDMONTON, Alberta (March 13, 2015) — The lower Athabasca River will continue to be exposed to significant risks under the *Surface Water Quantity Management Framework* released today by the Government of Alberta.

The long-overdue framework is intended to regulate water withdrawals by oilsands operators from the lower Athabasca River and achieves a number of objectives, but provides inadequate protection during the low-flow winter period, the river's most sensitive time of the year.

The framework fails to include an ecosystem base flow (EBF), a critical low-flow limit at or below which the aquatic ecosystem requires all available water, and therefore is protected from water withdrawals.

Instead of including an EBF — a practice that would be consistent with world-leading water resource management — the plan gives precedence to water withdrawals of senior oilsands operations during these rare and sensitive low-flow periods. Regardless of how low flows drop in the river, the equivalent of over 1600 bathtubs of water per minute (4.4 cubic metres per second) is always permitted to be withdrawn.

Implementing an EBF would be expected to rarely restrict water withdrawals from the lower Athabasca River, as the threshold considered in the most recent multi-stakeholder planning process was equivalent to a one-in-one hundred year low flow in the winter period. However on such rare occasions reduced habitat and oxygen levels can be expected to pose major threats to the river's aquatic life.

Quotes

"The new management framework for the lower Athabasca River presents an opportunity to protect the long-term health of the river," said David Miller, President and CEO of WWF-Canada. "Setting an EBF, a minimum river flow threshold, is critical to ensuring good river management that protects water for wildlife and ecosystems. Unfortunately, it's missing in the framework released today."

"This framework does not align with the Government of Alberta's regional plan of balancing economic development with ecosystem protection," said Erin Flanagan, Pembina Institute analyst. "It is unclear how oilsands development can be undertaken responsibly — within science-based environmental limits — if Alberta does not have a minimum flow rate below which water withdrawals do not occur in the Athabasca River."

"For about a one per cent increase in per-barrel capital costs, senior oilsands operators Suncor and Syncrude could build storage ponds to stop withdrawing from the river at its lowest flows," said Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist with the Alberta Wilderness Association. "Instead, the Alberta government has chosen to leave this important river ecosystem at risk."

"Limiting water withdrawals for a short period once in one hundred years is acceptable, especially when doing so is expected to result in significant benefits for the river and help operators secure social licence to operate," said Bob Cameron of the South Peace Environment Association.

-30-

For more information on the role of lowest-flow water cut-offs in the protection of the Athabasca River, see this formal submission by the Pembina Institute and this report by WWF-Canada.

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About Pembina Institute

The Pembina Institute advances clean energy solutions through research, education, consulting and advocacy. www.pembina.org

About Alberta Wilderness Association

AWA is the oldest wilderness conservation group in Alberta dedicated to the completion of a protected areas network and the conservation of wilderness throughout the province. www.albertawilderness.ca

About South Peace Environment Association

SPEA is working to address air, water, and land management challenges in the Peace region and northern Alberta.

About WWF

WWF is creating solutions to the most serious conservation challenges facing our planet, helping people and nature thrive. www.wwf.ca

Background

Flowing north of Fort McMurray, the lower Athabasca River provides habitat for 31 species of fish, half the total fish species found in Alberta – and terminates at the Peace-Athabasca Delta, an internationally significant wetlands area for migratory birds. Alberta's mineable oilsands region of shallow bitumen deposits flanks the lower Athabasca River banks for 100 kilometers. Pressures on the River from oilsands development include water withdrawals, loss of tributary streams used for fish spawning and rearing habitat, loss of peat wetlands that regulate water runoff and purification, and cumulative water quality effects from toxic air emission deposits, spills and tailings leakage. Meanwhile, scientific knowledge of the river's aquatic ecosystem, especially in winter ice-covered conditions, is still very limited.

The framework fails to include an **ecosystem base flow (EBF), which is a threshold at which river flows fall below a critically low level warranting a cut-off of water withdrawals.** The multi-stakeholder Phase 2 Framework Committee — which provided Alberta Environment and Fisheries and Oceans Canada with recommendations on long-term water management rules for the oilsands industry water withdrawals in 2010 — reached agreement on the implementation of an EBF in principle, but not in practice.

A science-based and precautionary EBF is critically important because:

- Flows in the lower Athabasca River are projected to continue to decline in the future;
- The downstream Peace-Athabasca Delta, a Ramsar wetland site, is maintained by natural fluctuations in water levels and flows, and is one of the largest freshwater deltas in the world;
- Water allocations in the Athabasca Basin, primarily for oilsands development, have been growing 13 times faster over the past decade than the provincial average.

A 2010 review of environmental flows for the lower Athabasca River by Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) Canada's Science Advisory Secretariat concluded that specifying an evidence-based EBF for the river was not possible, due to limited data. The review concluded, however, that although scientific uncertainty exists about the exact flow threshold for an EBF, "there was concurrence that a flow should be established for the lower Athabasca River below which there would be no withdrawal of water," and that "this flow should be established using a precautionary approach." Furthermore, DFO's 2010 science evaluation report indicates that establishing an appropriate precautionary cutoff flow below which water withdrawals would cease would also address concerns regarding the potential effect of climate change on future flows in the lower Athabasca River.

In 2007 the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board / Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency Joint Review Panel (JRP) report on Imperial Oil Resources Ventures Limited's Kearl Oil Sands Project recognized the need for an EBF. The JRP indicated that an EBF was a critical component of any water management framework for the Athabasca River and, if implemented, could mitigate significant adverse environmental impacts. The JRP strongly recommended that Alberta Environment and DFO incorporate an EBF in the final water management framework for the Athabasca River. The Government of Canada, through DFO, accepted the JRP's EBF recommendation.