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Alberta's Hay River Basin at Risk: New Pollution Research

An investigation of nine pipeline spill locations in northwest Alberta's Hay River Basin has found that the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) is failing in its responsibility to protect the environment, Treaty rights and the public interest. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) calls on the Alberta government and AER to strengthen pipeline spill transparency and oversight based on these findings.

"The research identified weak AER oversight of energy pipeline spill impacts, adding to other evidence that pipeline risks are inadequately managed," says AWA conservation specialist Carolyn Campbell. "The AER needs to reduce risks to the environment and communities, while providing more timely and credible information about pipeline spill impacts."

Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders worked with wetland biologist Kevin Timoney and other scientists to investigate nine pipeline spill sites on Dene Tha traditional territory in the Hay River watershed of northwest Alberta. The spills occurred between the 1970s and 2012. The investigation found that lingering impacts from the spills were significantly worse overall compared to AER's records on spill volume recovery rates and wildlife habitat impacts for those sites. These discrepancies raise questions about the quality of Alberta's pipeline spill cleanup certification processes.

The research also analyzed AER data on 35,000 crude oil and saline water spills across Alberta, spanning 38 years from 1975 to early 2013. The analysis suggests that Alberta's pipeline spill records generally overstate spill volume recovery rates, and understate harmful impacts on wildlife and their habitat. One risk identified from unreliable cleanup data is that harmful effects to soils and vegetation, which can be especially persistent with saline water spills, are not being properly documented or managed.

AWA believes that other recent pipeline spills also point to inadequate pipeline safety management. In 2016, a Conoco Phillips - Paramount Resources pipeline spilled 380,000 litres of light petroleum condensate in west central Alberta; the spill affected lands in the Little Smoky endangered woodland caribou range, and waters including a creek flowing into the Simonette River. In 2015, a Nexen CNOOC pipeline spilled about five million litres of bitumen emulsion near its operations south of Fort McMurray.

In October 2016, Alberta's Auditor-General reported that the AER had not yet completed work on four pipeline safety recommendations the Auditor-General issued in March 2015. They were: implement a risk-based compliance process to assure that operators' pipeline integrity and safety systems are adequate; develop effective performance measures for pipeline operations; formalize a training program for core pipeline staff; and improve how resources are allocated for pipeline oversight.

A National Energy Board study released earlier this week found that pipeline leaks caused by human error have increased in the past three years, averaging 20 leaks per year, compared with four leaks per year during the previous six years.

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