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Concerns with an \$932-million Irrigation Expansion in Southern AB

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) has major concerns with the implementation of extensive new industrial irrigation infrastructure and the creation of additional irrigated acres in southern Alberta. This large expansion of reservoirs, pipelines and irrigated lands, funded in large part by the Canadian Infrastructure Bank (\$466.4 million) has largely been presented as a forgone conclusion. It hasn't undergone any public consultation and no environmental impact assessment of the project was conducted. Without these essential elements, many of the proposed works have already been started.

"Environmental risks need to be better understood before proceeding with a project of this magnitude – especially with such a large investment of public money," says Phillip Meintzer, Conservation Specialist at AWA.

In December 2020, an agreement was announced between the Government of Alberta, the Canadian Infrastructure Bank, and eight irrigation districts to fund an \$815-million-dollar expansion project for irrigation infrastructure in the South Saskatchewan River Basin – becoming the single largest irrigation expansion in Alberta's history. Proposed work for this project includes the construction of hundreds of kilometres of pipelines to replace existing open-water canals, four off-stream storage reservoirs – either expanded from existing reservoirs or completely new. On top of the new irrigation infrastructure, this project proposes an increase of 206,000 irrigated acres – supposedly gained through

efficiencies created from the conversion of canals to pipelines.

In November 2021, the Government of Alberta [announced](#) that the organizations involved are intending to invest additional \$117.7 million into the project, bringing the total investment to \$932.7 million.

In order to cross the minimum cost threshold to qualify for federal funding from the Canadian Infrastructure Bank, eight irrigation districts had to present all proposed works for this project under a single banner. However, once the funding agreement was approved, the proposed works have been presented as individual projects. The cumulative impact of all 57 projects is not being considered. AWA is very concerned that cumulative impacts to numerous species at risk are being ignored, despite southeastern Alberta's designation by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) as a national "Priority Place" for multi-species recovery. Lake Sturgeon, which scientists assessed as endangered in 2017, and Alberta's at-risk grassland species, have been overlooked. A robust cumulative environmental impacts assessment is necessary to ensure for the future sustainability of both water uses and riparian ecosystems within the basin and beyond Alberta's borders.

Seventy-eight percent of the water allocations in the Bow and Oldman River basins are already committed to irrigation agriculture. Approving expanded irrigation acres will only serve to intensify water use in basins that are already over-allocated, rather than considering the needs for healthy aquatic ecosystems and the potential impact of the climate crisis on water availability.

AWA recognizes the benefit of the canal-to-pipeline conversions in improving water-use efficiencies. Provided these efficiencies do not increase ecosystem risk, we call upon the Government of Alberta to apply a significant share of the public-financed water conservation gains to improve in-stream flows for healthier ecosystems, rather than allocating them solely for the benefit of a single industry. Water is an important public resource and our governments at

all levels need to ensure that in-stream flows are protected to support Alberta's fish and other aquatic organisms – especially crucial during drier than average years, which are likely to increase in both frequency and severity given predicted climate change scenarios.

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Dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and completion of a protected areas network, AWA inspires communities to care for Alberta's wild spaces through awareness and action.

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