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## **Project Update – SSRB Irrigation Infrastructure Expansion Project:**

The largest irrigation expansion in Alberta's history is steamrolling ahead without any consideration for the potential impacts of this project on aquatic ecosystem health or water conservation needs.

The South Saskatchewan River Basin Irrigation Infrastructure Expansion Project (hereafter the SSRB Irrigation Project) was announced in December 2020 as an agreement between the Government of Alberta, the federal government's Canadian Infrastructure Bank, and eight irrigation districts. The project was initially announced as an \$815-mil-

lion-dollar investment into irrigation infrastructure expansion. But in November 2021, the Government of Alberta announced that the parties involved now intended to invest an additional \$117.7 million into the project bringing the total to \$932.7 million.

The work proposed under this project includes constructing hundreds of kilometres of pipelines to replace existing open-water canals and four off-stream storage reservoirs – either expanded from existing reservoirs or completely new. In addition to the newly constructed irrigation infrastructure, this project proposes an increase of 206,000 irrigated acres (884 square kilometres – a footprint the size of Calgary). These additional acres are supposedly gained through efficiencies created from the conversion of canals to pipelines.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) and other environmental groups across the province share significant concerns with the project. The general public wasn't consulted at all; no environmental impact assessment of the project was conducted before proceeding. Many of the projects have already started. With such a large investment of public funds, regulators need to ensure that they consider the environmental impacts of the project and that the project is truly in the public's best interest – perhaps especially given future climate change scenarios. This irrigation expansion has the potential to impact in-stream flows, groundwater recharge, native grassland ecosystems, as well as species at-risk within the proposed project area. These impacts must be modelled and assessed before any more construction is started or completed.

In order to satisfy the minimum cost threshold to qualify for federal funding from the Canadian Infrastructure Bank, eight (now ten) irrigation districts had to present all proposed works for this project under a single banner. However, once funding was secured the idea that this is one project evaporated. The proposed works are presented as individual projects and the cumulative impact of all 57 projects is not being considered. A robust cumulative environmental impacts assessment is necessary to ensure the future

sustainability of both water uses and riparian ecosystems within the South Saskatchewan River basin, within and beyond Alberta's borders.

Seventy-eight percent of current 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. This overlooks the needs for healthy aquatic ecosystems and the potential impact of the climate crisis on water availability. AWA recognizes and welcomes the benefit of the canal-to-pipeline conversions in improving water-use efficiencies. But these efficiencies should not be used to justify expanding the amount of irrigation acres if this expansion increases ecosystem risk. Water is an important public resource and in-stream flows must be protected and prioritized to support Alberta's fish and other aquatic organisms. These flows are especially crucial during drier than average years, circumstances likely to increase in both frequency and severity given predicted climate change scenarios.

With legal assistance from Ecojustice, the group of concerned environmental interests including AWA, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) – Southern Alberta Chapter, Sierra Club Canada Foundation – Prairie Chapter, The Society of Grasslands Naturalists, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), and Nature Alberta have written letters to Alberta Environment and Parks and Environment and Climate Change Canada. We are formally requesting that the relevant Director(s) require this project to undergo an environmental impact assessment pursuant to Alberta's Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act. We have requested that – at a minimum – the relevant Director should exercise authority to require the ten irrigation districts to provide comprehensive and detailed information on the design and operation of the proposed project activities. This information is important to ensuring that an informed decision can be made on the need for an environmental assessment.

*- Phillip Meintzer*