

Wilderness Watch

Calgary Airport – Banff Passenger Rail Proposal

You may have heard news of a proposed passenger train that would go from Calgary airport to Banff, with five stops along the way (Calgary Downtown, Calgary Keith, Cochrane, Morley [Stoney Nakoda], and Canmore). Liricon Capital Inc., the proponent of this project and owner of the Norquay Ski Resort, hopes to bring the project to completion and operation by 2025. Liricon claims that the train could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by taking vehicles off the road and by potentially powering the train with hydrogen. AWA and other conservation organizations have many questions about this ambitious goal, and whether a train is the best way to achieve it. We also have concerns about how a train could negatively affect wildlife and habitat connectivity in the already stressed Bow Valley. In July 2022, the Alberta government announced that it is not willing to support this development due to the financial risk of the project.

Banff National Park is already the most highly visited national park in the country, and it cannot support increased visitation while maintaining ecological values. It seems very unlikely that a train from Calgary to Banff would reduce traffic on the highway, as suggested by the proponent, but rather that it may increase tourism overall and therefore increase visitation to the park. In this case, it is unclear how the train will reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, especially when the proponent has not committed to using hydrogen technology to power the train, which would otherwise be diesel-fueled. A 2018 Calgary-Bow Valley Mass Transit Feasibility Study concluded that a bus could achieve greater reductions in greenhouse gas emissions when compared to a diesel-fueled train. This raises the question as to why a train is being proposed rather than a bus service, if the goal is to achieve GHG emissions reductions.

Additionally, there has to date been no assessment of how wildlife may be

impacted by the proposed train. Trains are already a significant cause of wildlife mortality in the Bow Valley. Grizzly bears, currently listed as threatened under the *Alberta Wildlife Act*, are of particular concern because of their low population numbers – the death of a single bear can have a significant impact on the entire population. Ungulates such as deer and elk are also regularly struck by the CP rail line that runs through the Bow Valley. Along with direct mortality by trains, the addition of another linear disturbance to the Bow Valley impacts habitat connectivity, which reduces the suitability of habitats for wildlife.

If this project were to move forward from the development to the design phase, AWA would expect the proponent to address how wildlife concerns would be mitigated through fencing and wildlife crossing structures, while acknowledging that these concerns can never be fully eliminated.

- By Devon Earl