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Alberta Wilderness Association



Coal and oil sands mining can have big impacts on water. Photo © N. Douglas

### **AWA Calls for Stronger Regulatory Oversight of Coal and Oil Sands Mining Following Unreported Wastewater Spills by CST Canada Coal Ltd.**

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is calling for stronger regulatory oversight of coal and oil sands mining industries in Alberta following two unreported incidents of coal wastewater releases by CST Canada Coal Ltd from its Grande Cache coal mine operations. The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) is investigating the spills, which highlight the need for stronger standards and greater transparency and accountability in how coal and oil sands mines are regulated in the province.

"The AER and Alberta government ministries have a responsibility to ensure that industrial development in Alberta is carried out in a way that protects the environment," said Devon Earl, AWA conservation specialist. "The fact that these spills

were not reported immediately underscores the importance of stronger regulatory oversight of these industries.”

On Dec. 29, 2022 about 107,000 litres of coal wash water was released from CST Coal’s Grande Cache mine site, and on March 4, 2023, 1.1 million litres of coal fines (water and coal fine particles) were released into the Smoky River. Coal wastewater is known to have detrimental effects on fish and aquatic ecosystems within affected waterbodies. Selenium is a common pollutant from coal mining, and if present, can potentially cause deformities and reproductive failure for fish. Pollutants from coal mining can also interrupt seasonal migrations and lead to extirpation in affected watersheds. “The AER needs to ensure that no fish have been harmed by these spills,” said Phillip Meintzer, AWA conservation specialist. “If these companies are going to be permitted to operate, then they need to be held accountable for their actions, and our regulator needs to step up to the task.”

According to a government survey conducted in early 2021, 85 percent of Albertans lack confidence in the AER’s ability to effectively regulate coal projects to safeguard water, the environment, and human health. The unreported wastewater spills by CST Canada Coal Ltd. only serve to further erode public trust in Alberta’s regulation of coal mining.

This news comes on the heels of another incident where a leaking tailings pond at Imperial Oil’s Kearl Lake oil sands mine went unreported for nine months, likely harming fish. The combination of these incidents demonstrates an immediate need for stronger regulatory action to ensure that energy and mining activities are conducted in a way that prioritizes environmental protection and public health. Companies that fail to comply with regulations and requirements should be held accountable for putting the environment and human health at risk.

On October 31, 2013, a tailings pond dam failure at the Obed Mountain Coal Mine, near Hinton Alberta, caused a spill of 670 million litres of contaminated water into Athabasca River fish-bearing tributaries, leading to a contaminated water plume entering the Athabasca River. During the AER’s subsequent investigation of the spill, the regulator determined that, not only had Dyke E been built in the wrong location, but that it was built too quickly to have been done properly.

AWA is also concerned about weak provincial mine reclamation requirements, including a lack of timely progressive reclamation deadlines, and a lack of transparency around operators’ cleanup cost estimates. As part of Alberta’s current review of its Mine Financial Security Program, AWA believes Alberta must require mine operators to post full financial security with government, equal to the transparent, credible costs of their existing reclamation obligations.

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