

Even regulators don't know impact of oilsands projects

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Re: "Protecting river is a high priority," by Jay Nagendran, Letters, Nov. 8.

Jay Nagendran, assistant deputy minister of Alberta Environment's Oil Sands Environmental Management Division, assures Albertans that Alberta Environment is managing the Athabasca River in a sustainable fashion.

I disagree. While they have been sampling water quantity and quality in the oilsands region, their monitoring program has generally lacked scientific focus and has been almost non-existent downstream of Fort McMurray. In addition, while thousands of samples may have been taken in northeastern Alberta, minimal resources have been dedicated to analyzing data from the samples and using the information gained to either inform resource management planning or refine monitoring plans to fill critical information gaps.

As I informed the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board last November, since 1970 there has been a 50-per cent decline in the amount of water delivered to the Athabasca River from the surrounding landscape in the 94 per cent of the basin that's downstream of Hinton.

Recent studies on the effects of climate change on the Athabasca River and northeast Alberta estimate that average annual river flows in the not-too-distant future may be one-third less than average flows today. In wet years there will be more than that, and in dry years potentially much, much less.

I would love to be able to say that this kind of information has been used or even considered in Alberta's management plans for the Lower Athabasca River and oilsands development, but it has not.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada recently testified that they are unable to predict the cumulative effects of oilsands development on fish or fish habitat in the Lower Athabasca.

As the government ministry charged solely with managing freshwater fisheries, this demonstrates the abject failure on their part to do what they exist to do. Unfortunately, neither Alberta nor the federal government has supported the necessary research, and have instead based their industrial approvals and water management plans merely on historical average flows and the assumption they will not change in the future.

In its recent 2007-013 Imperial Oil oilsands decision, which is available on its website, the EUB expressed considerable concern that a watershed management plan has not been delivered as previously promised by Alberta, and that it "has seen no evidence that work has started on this critical priority."

While Alberta's Public Affairs Bureau and Nagendran may insist that they have been doing the science necessary and their decisions are informed by the best science, the simple fact is that Alberta Environment's water science branch has been seriously understaffed and underfunded for far too long.

The combination of an appalling lack of science resources and political prioritization of the promotion of energy development by Alberta Environment is the reason that critical science and monitoring programs have been practically non-existent for the past decade.

And it is why Alberta now has insufficient information to create science-based, ecologically informed water management plans that can assure the protection of the Athabasca River and most of Alberta's other rivers.

Clearly, the Alberta government has dropped the ball on proactive planning of provincial water management and development of water-intensive industries like the oilsands.

We've now sold all kinds of mineral rights to oilsands developers, and yet have minimal understanding of the dynamics or security of long-term water supplies upon which they will rely.

We are relying on a stable and ample water supply in northeastern Alberta as the basis for more than \$100 billion in oilsands-related investment and for the economic future of Alberta, and yet all the evidence points to a future where water supplies likely will be neither stable nor ample.

In the wake of what was supposedly an industry-crippling decision of our government to raise royalty rates in the province, Exxon-Mobil predicted last week that Alberta's oilsands output will quadruple by 2030. And any of that explosive growth in the Fort McMurray area is going to rely heavily on water from the Athabasca River or its tributaries.

While Alberta no doubt has placed a high priority on managing Alberta's waters, it is clear that it has placed a much higher priority on approving large-scale industrial projects that rely on water.

The environmental and economic risks associated with a growing reliance on a highly water-intensive industrial base in a period of declining water supply are extreme. In Alberta, the over-allocated South Saskatchewan River is the only river for which there is now an approved water management plan, and yet we are going like gangbusters all across the province when it comes to approving major developments that rely on water.

Anyone who manages even a household budget knows you have to understand your supply of resources and costs before you can manage either properly. Evidently, our government believes this isn't the case when it comes to water and development in Alberta.

While Nagendran may express public confidence in the management of the Athabasca River and oilsands development, I -- and apparently the EUB -- do not share that confidence.

Ultimately, we're going to have to make some very difficult decisions in Alberta when it comes to water, and hopefully we will still have a variety of options by the time our politicians and senior bureaucrats find the political will and intestinal fortitude for it.

It would be nice if the Alberta government just admitted that its priority is energy development, and that it's going to happen whether or not we know the environmental effects.

Albertans could then decide whether that's the choice they want to make, rather than being lulled into a false sense of security on the basis of political ignorance and deception.

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