

# Alberta's Proposed Wetlands Policy

...and what you can do to help save Alberta's precious wetlands

The Government of Alberta is currently considering a wetlands policy for Alberta as developed by the Alberta Water Council.<sup>i</sup> Your support is needed to ensure the proposed policy to protect wetlands is adopted. Wetlands play a critical role in providing essential ecosystem goods and services – such as clean air and water – and provide substantial economic benefits to our provincial economy. After a decade of debate and the loss of thousands of hectares of wetlands in Alberta, we cannot afford to delay action any longer.

## What is a Wetland?

A wetland is defined as land having water at, near, or above the land surface, or which is saturated with water long enough to promote wetland or aquatic processes as indicated by poorly drained (hydric) soils, hydrophytic vegetation, and various kinds of biological activity that are adapted to the wet environment.<sup>ii</sup>

Photo: Lorne Fitch



## Will Government of Alberta support the Alberta Water Council policy?

At this time, the Government of Alberta is reviewing a series of recommendations advanced by the Alberta Water Council with plans to implement a province-wide Wetlands Policy in the near future.<sup>iii</sup> The recommendations were widely supported by the conservation community, government and industry (with the exception of the oil sands sector).

The oil sands sector has argued for a policy that is weaker than what was recommended by the rest the Alberta Water Council based on what they view as limited opportunities for compensation and increased cost.<sup>iv</sup> But there are significant opportunities for restoration opportunities in northeastern Alberta. For example:

1. There is potential to restore upland and wetland habitats on approximately 40,000 square kilometers of private land in northern Alberta.
2. There are numerous opportunities within the 68,000 km<sup>2</sup> area of the Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Forest Management Area.

3. The cost for private land acquisition as a "biodiversity offset" is a relatively inexpensive form of mitigation. One report estimated the cost to permanently offset a direct footprint over the life of an oilsands project could be as little as \$0.14 per barrel for a hypothetical oil sands mine.<sup>v</sup>

**Wetlands cover 18 percent of Alberta's land base  
– an area of 117,400 square kilometers.<sup>1</sup>**

## History of Wetland Protection: A Commitment to Adopt a Policy by 2007

In 2004, after extensive consultation with the public, the Alberta *Water for Life* strategy identified a short-term goal of developing a wetlands policy and associated action plan by no later than 2007. In 2005, the Alberta Water Council formed a committee to make recommendation for a new wetlands policy. In September 2008, after three years of discussions among all key stakeholders in the province, 23 of 25 members of the Alberta Water Council advanced recommendations to the Government of Alberta for their consideration in developing a new policy.

## Wetlands Matter!

Wetlands provide significant value and numerous benefits to all Albertans.<sup>vi</sup> You may be surprised to know that wetlands:

- Protect shorelines against erosion.
- Store atmospheric carbon. FACT: Wetlands store as much as 40 percent of global terrestrial carbon.<sup>vii</sup> It is estimated that Alberta's peatland-wetland systems store up to 13.75 billion tonnes of carbon.<sup>viii</sup>
- Provide critical habitat for wildlife including many species of fish and migratory birds.
- Serve as a source of water for replenishing regional groundwater supplies.
- Help reduce the intensity of flooding and minimize flood damage by storing water. FACT: One-half hectare of wetlands can store over 6,000 cubic metres of floodwater.<sup>ix</sup>
- Provide numerous recreation activities including boating, bird watching, nature photography, hunting, fish, and tourism.
- Improve water quality by filtering and decomposing harmful pollution. FACT: Wetlands can reduce nitrate by 80 percent and phosphorus by 94 percent.<sup>x</sup>
- Mitigate the impact of drought by providing water for livestock during drought conditions.

### Alberta Water Council Wetland Policy Goals

*"... maintain wetland area in Alberta such that the ecological, social, and economic benefits that wetlands provide are maintained, thereby helping to ensure Albertans have healthy watersheds that provide safe and secure drinking water supplies, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy. In recognition of the high rates of wetland loss in some watersheds, this policy also encourages Albertans to be proactive in increasing wetland area."<sup>1</sup>*

## The Economic Benefits of Wetlands in Alberta

Peatlands are wetlands that are made up of semi-decayed plant materials accumulated over 5,000-7,000 years providing a vast array of ecological goods and services – and most significantly, carbon storage.

Approximately two-thirds of wetlands in Alberta have been lost due to land-use impacts. When wetlands disappear, ecosystem functions are lost (e.g. water purification) and the cost of replicating those natural processes is incurred. The annual costs can be monetized by determining the value of lost carbon sequestration as well as the loss of ecological services such as water quality, groundwater protection, wildlife habitat, and flood protection. The cost due to the cumulative loss of wetlands in Alberta

has been estimated to be \$7.7 billion annually – or 9 percent of Alberta's 2003 Gross Domestic Product.<sup>xi</sup> If the value of shoreline protection services (wetland buffers along shorelines) are also considered, the lost benefit rises to \$18 billion annually.<sup>xii</sup>

According to a more recent report by the Canadian Boreal Initiative, the annual non-market benefit of peatlands is more significant than originally estimated. Peatlands cover 16 percent of Alberta and are estimated to provide \$52 billion in services annually (for carbon storage, flood control, and water filtering).<sup>xiii</sup>

### Your support is needed!

Your input to government on this critical matter is more important than ever – particularly in light of the oil sands sector's objections to the recommendations of the Alberta Water Council. There are over 50,000 hectares of wetlands at stake. Quick adoption of a wetlands policy would ensure a no net loss of these wetlands for Alberta.

You can help by supporting the adoption of a wetlands policy and raising concerns about the potential destruction of wetlands by oil sands activities. Oil and gas development pose the single greatest threat to future wetlands loss in Alberta. A solution must deal directly with this issue.

Here are some things that you can do:

1. Learn more by reviewing the strong recommendations advanced by the majority of members on the Alberta Water Council. These recommendations are available at <http://www.awchome.ca>
2. Ask the Government of Alberta to adopt the Alberta Water Council's recommendations and implement a strong wetlands policy. See below.
3. Consider contacting your local MLA about this issue. See below.

**Contact Premier Ed Stelmach**

Ed Stelmach  
Office of the Premier  
Room 307, Legislature Building  
10800 – 97th Ave.  
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B6

email: [fortsaskatchewan.vegreville@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:fortsaskatchewan.vegreville@assembly.ab.ca)

**Contact Environment Minister Rob Renner**

Rob Renner  
#425 Legislature Building  
10800 – 97th Ave.  
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B6

email: [medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca)

**Contact Your MLA**

Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
[http://www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla\\_home](http://www.assembly.ab.ca/net/index.aspx?p=mla_home)

Chief Electoral Office  
<http://www.electionsalberta.ab.ca/streetkey/>

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<sup>i</sup> The Alberta Water Council is made up of 25 representatives from four broad categories: industry, government (municipal, First Nations), provincial government, and non-governmental organizations. A full listing of the AWC members can be found at: <http://www.awchome.ca/AboutUs/CouncilMembers/tabid/56/Default.aspx>.

<sup>ii</sup> Tarnocai, C. 1979. *Canadian Wetland Registry in Proceedings of a Workshop on Canadian Wetlands Environment*. C.D.A Rubec and F.C. Pollett, eds., Canada Land Directorate, Ecological Land Classification Series, No. 12.

<sup>iii</sup> See *Recommendations for a New Alberta Wetlands Policy*. Alberta Water Council. September 16, 2008 at <http://www.awchome.ca/Projects/WetlandPolicyProjectTeam/tabid/103/Default.aspx>.

<sup>iv</sup> When issues of non-consensus arise, the Alberta Water Council provides a venue for any party to outline those items they cannot support and propose alternative solutions. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and the Alberta Chamber of Resources each submitted a letter outlining those areas of the wetlands policy they could not support. See *Recommendations for a New Alberta Wetlands Policy*. Alberta Water Council. September 16, 2008 at <http://www.awchome.ca/Projects/WetlandPolicyProjectTeam/tabid/103/Default.aspx>.

<sup>v</sup> S. Dyer et al. *Catching Up: Conservation and Biodiversity Offsets in Alberta's Boreal Forest*. Canadian Boreal Initiative. March 2008. p. 20.

<sup>vi</sup> See *Recommendations for a New Alberta Wetlands Policy*. Alberta Water Council. September 16, 2008, p. 9 at <http://www.awchome.ca/Projects/WetlandPolicyProjectTeam/tabid/103/Default.aspx>.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark Anielski, Sarah Wilson. *Counting Canada's Natural Capital: Assessing the Real Value of Canada's Ecosystem Services*. The Pembina Institute. Commissioned by the Canadian Boreal Initiative. November, 2005, p. 53.

<sup>viii</sup> S. Wilson et al., September, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Mark Anielski, Sarah Wilson. November, 2005, p. 53. Citing Olewiler, *The Value of Natural Capital in Settled Areas of Canada*; and Ross, *Canada's Good Fortune*.

<sup>x</sup> Mark Anielski, Sarah Wilson. November, 2005, p. 53. Citing Olewiler, *The Value of Natural Capital in Settled Areas of Canada*; and Ross, *Canada's Good Fortune*.

<sup>xi</sup> The Pembina Institute. *Fact Sheet. Alberta Genuine Progress Indicator: Wetlands*. August 2005, p. 1-2.

<sup>xii</sup> S. Wilson et al., September, 2001, p. 20.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark Anielski, Sarah Wilson. November, 2005, p. 58.