



ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

January 23, 2015

Brett Maracle, Panel Manager
Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency
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Dear Mr. Maracle,

**Re: Robb Trend Coal Mine Expansion Project – Environmental Assessment
CEAA Project Reference Number 61436**

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is writing to provide support for an environmental assessment by an independent review panel of the Robb Trend Coal Mine Expansion project. We believe there is no doubt that this project will cause significant adverse environmental effects and we request that the project be denied.

AWA works throughout Alberta towards more representative and connected protection of Alberta's unique and vital landscapes that are the source of our abundant clean water, clean air and vital habitat for wildlife in each one of our six natural regions. We have been working in Alberta for almost fifty years, to raise the profile of Alberta's spectacular wilderness, and to help Albertans learn more about the value of our wilderness and wildlife, and participate in opportunities to protect and care for the legacy that we will leave for future generations. With over 7000 members and supporters, AWA remains committed to assuring protection of wildlife and wild places for all Albertans.

Denying the Robb Trend Expansion Project would be an important step towards reducing Canada's overall greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and meeting international emission targets. Burning thermal coal for electricity generation releases many pollutants that have severe human health consequences and Alberta's coal plants contribute one-third of the province's industrial GHGs. The Premier of Alberta declared that coal plants are "in their wind-down phase and can be phased out and we can achieve very significant emissions reductions just by not burning coal." If this expansion project is approved, it will continue to supply the Coal Valley Mine Coal Processing Plant for another

quarter century. Alberta should be adopting a 10-year coal phase-out similar to Ontario and focus on a renewable energy strategy instead of continuing to approve open-pit thermal coal mine developments. There are viable energy alternatives to coal that eliminate the need for coal fired electricity. The benefit to a small number of Albertans gained by approving the expansion project is greatly outweighed by the enormous cost to society and its environment. This cost is not only in decreased air quality but also in land and water quality.

The draft agreement to establish a joint review panel between the Minister of the Environment, Canada and the Alberta Energy Regulator, Alberta, identifies several factors that will be considered in the review. AWA offers the following comments on these important factors.

Cumulative Effects Assessment

The region encompassing the expansion project proposal is and has historically been under intense land use changes. The cumulative effects of mining, oil, gas, forestry and associated roads, pipelines, increased off-highway vehicle access, and more, contribute to already degraded wildlife habitat and watershed health. The biological limits of this area have been exceeded and this project will negatively add to an already strained landscape. The proposed development footprint of 5729 hectares is an incredible amount of land and water to be altered and scarred for the length of the project, proposed to last as long as twenty five years. Threatened fish and wildlife populations cannot withstand further loss of habitat. Coal development and logging operations over the years have already released large sediment loads and heavy metals into the Athabasca watershed including the McLeod River, Pembina River, and many tributaries flowing into them.

Without a proper land use plan in place for this region under *Alberta's Land Use Framework (2008)*, projects of this nature simply must not be approved. Regional cumulative effects assessments are a minimal requirement and linear disturbance thresholds must be established prior to the approval of any new surface coal mines.

Accidents and Malfunctions

The Athabasca watershed has suffered with devastating spills from oil rigs, mining, and pipelines. Coal Valley Resources Inc.'s (CVRI's) Environmental Impact Assessment states "spill conditions were not assessed since the incidence of spills occurring at the Coal Valley Mine is low." Canada should learn from the lesson of the Obed Mountain Mine spill in Alberta and the Mount Polley spill in British Columbia that just because spills do not occur frequently does not mean they do not occur at all. Failed retention walls of end pit lakes can risk entire populations of fish, harm other aquatic species, impact human health through their drinking water, and affect all other ecosystem players. The Obed Mountain Mine spill occurred when an on-site containment pond holding a slurry of coal cleaning plant waste was breached. The breach released approximately 670 million litres of waste into tributaries of the Athabasca River. The physical damage in and around Apetowun Creek and Plante Creek was significant and the extent of impacts to aquatic organisms is still unclear after more than a year. Charges and remediation are still pending. The plume of waste water contained mostly coal particles, clay, mud, shale, and suspended solids but also contained toxic pollutants including flocculants, selenium, arsenic, lead, mercury, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. Disregarding the risk of an accident or malfunction for the Robb Trend Expansion Project Proposal would be a grave mistake.

Effects of Changes to the Environment

The expansion project will impact over ten watercourses including Bryan Creek, Hay Creek, Erith River, Bacon Creek, Jackson Creek, Embarras River, Halpenny Creek, Lendrum Creek, Lund Creek, and tributaries to Pembina River. The majority of these watercourses provide crucial spawning, rearing, feeding, and overwintering habitat for several native fish species. The project would require fifteen watercourse diversions and fourteen watercourse crossings. The project will also construct twelve end pit lakes which will remain as lakes beyond the life of the mining. Considering these significant numbers, there is an imminent danger of the project having devastating impacts on aquatic ecosystems. This includes impacts on Athabasca rainbow trout, bull trout, and Arctic grayling – native ‘species at risk,’ sensitive to watershed changes.

Athabasca rainbow trout are classified as “May be at Risk” in the *General Status of Alberta Wild Species* report and considered “Threatened” under Alberta *Wildlife Act*. A joint provincial and federal recovery plan was completed in 2014 to aid in the successful recovery of this species. It states in the recovery plan that a study done in 2013 showed eighty percent of 533 streams were considered high risk with less than twenty Athabasca rainbow trout per hectare. “High risk populations are likely vulnerable to compensatory factors that can inhibit population recovery and could reflect either naturally unproductive or degraded habitat conditions that reduce resilience against and slow recovery from, abiotic environmental stresses such as major floods or fire, or **anthropogenic stresses resulting from land use**” (*Alberta Athabasca Rainbow Trout Recovery Plan 2014-2019*)(emphasis added).

Bull trout, Alberta’s provincial fish, is listed as “Sensitive” in the current *General Status of Alberta Wild Species* report and classified as “Threatened” under Alberta’s *Wildlife Act*. Research suggests that bull trout have very specific spawning requirements therefore increased human access can directly correlate with decreases in population size. They are sensitive to stream habitat degradation and changes in stream temperature, sedimentation, linear disturbance, and substrate. The *Bull Trout Conservation Management Plan (March 2012)* states the following:

“The fact that many bull trout populations have not recovered, or are still considered vulnerable, has largely been a consequence of the increasing cumulative impacts of industrial and recreational activities within the species historic range as well as competition from introduced fish species. Conserving healthy aquatic ecosystems requires the adoption of disturbance thresholds that will not be exceeded, and a commitment to restoration and protection of degraded habitats.”

Arctic grayling are classified as “Sensitive” in the *General Status of Alberta Wild Species* report and Alberta’s Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) has identified Arctic grayling as a “Species of Special Concern” (a species that without human intervention may soon become threatened with extinction). The populations in the Erith River drainage have already been impacted and a large scale development may be detrimental to them if the functioning creek and stream corridor is altered to an end pit lake complex, as proposed.

Considering the rapid decline and threatened status of the three native fish mentioned above, found within the project proposed area of expansion, ‘minimizing disturbance’ and ‘habitat compensation planning’ is simply not adequate. This project alone exceeds disturbance thresholds

these fish species can withstand, without taking into account the cumulative impacts of other industrial activities.

AWA considers this project to threaten the habitat of Alberta's fish and wildlife to such a large degree that we believe the Canadian Environment Minister should reject the proposal because it is likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects.

We realized this morning as we prepared the final version of this letter that we were mistaken in believing the deadline for submissions was January 23. We sincerely apologize for missing the deadline of January 20 and hope you may be able to give our comments due consideration.

AWA respectfully requests that the Robb Trend Coal Mine Expansion Project Proposal be denied.

Sincerely,
ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

<original signed by>

Brittany Verbeek
AWA Conservation Specialist

cc:

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