

Southern Alberta Environmental Group

Box 383, Lethbridge, AB T1J 3Y7

NEWSLETTER

January-February, 2004

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Editor's Note: Due to unforeseen circumstances a January newsletter was not produced, hence this issue is two in one. Belated greetings for a healthy and rewarding 2004.

Announcements

SAEG MEETING

7:30 pm, Thursday, 5 February 2004
Fish & Game Hut, 9th Ave. and 10th St. S.

A brief business meeting, beginning at 6:45 pm, will precede a presentation and general discussion regarding

Southern Tributaries of the Oldman River Troubled Waters

Cheryl Bradley

This presentation will provide the background to SAEG's current appeal of a decision by Alberta Environment to amend a water licence allowing an irrigation district to use water for purposes other than irrigation. An update on planning for water management in the Oldman River basin also will be provided. Discussion will deal with future SAEG involvement in this matter.

Everyone is welcome. Refreshments provided. BYOMug.

Keeping the Wild in the West

7th Prairie Conservation & Endangered Species Conference
February 26 - 29, 2004
Coast Plaza Hotel, Calgary

Leading experts in prairie conservation and endangered species will be featured in a wide variety of sessions. Future challenges in rural diversification and habitat restoration will be considered. The conference will be of interest to a wide range of participants. For more information and to register visit www.pcesc.ca or phone (403)283-2025.

Oldman River Basin Water Quality Initiative 7th Annual Workshop

8 am - 5 pm, Tuesday, 2 March, 2004
Lethbridge Lodge Hotel, Lethbridge

Focus will be on current activities to improve water quality.

Posters and displays on relevant projects and topics are welcome. Guest presenters include Dr. David Schindler, one of Canada's eminent freshwater scientists, and Andy Russell. For more information and to register (\$35) call 382-4239 or visit <http://www.oldmanbasin.org>

Notes and Updates

Tribute to Paul Wilkinson – Dr. Paul Wilkinson passed away on December 20, 2003 at the age of 84. With his passing SAEG has lost a long-standing member and stalwart supporter. Throughout his adult life, though his words and actions, Paul strove to protect our natural world. Professionally, Paul was a well-known entomologist specializing in the ecology of ticks. He worked in Uganda and Australia before coming to Canada to conduct research with Agriculture Canada in Kamloops and Lethbridge. After retiring in 1984 he became active as a volunteer in private and community endeavours dealing with environmental issues. Paul served as a director of SAEG, bringing his “eccentric wit and appreciation for the sublime” to Board meetings and general members’ meetings. Our condolences to his wife Joyce and family. We too will miss him.

Paul requested that memorial donations be directed to the Helen Schuler Coulee Nature Centre, c/o Growing the Grass Roots Program, 910 - 4 Ave. S., Lethbridge AB T1J 0P6.

Members, Thank You for Your Support – Thank you to all who have renewed your support for SAEG. The network of supporters for SAEG's work in environmental awareness and advocacy continues to grow. If you have not yet renewed, or would like to become a member please do so by sending a cheque (\$25 for adults; \$15 for students) to SAEG at Box 383, Lethbridge, AB T1J 3Y7. Or, pay our treasurer directly at the meeting on February 5th.

SAEG Volunteers Recognition and Wish List -

Recognition: Klaus Jericho and Janet Walker are thanked for their fine work in producing a new membership brochure. Brochures, to be used in recruiting new members, are available from Klaus at 327-4062.

Wish List: • A volunteer with experience in computer databases is needed to maintain the organization's membership and mailing lists. Tasks will include transferring current data into a standard electronic format, ongoing updates of lists in consultation with the treasurer and others, regular reporting on membership status to the executive, and providing labels or e-mail lists for mailings. Estimated time commitment is about two to three hours a month. If interested, please call Cheryl at 328-1245.

• One of SAEG's bulletin boards is lost. It is a blue board in a navy blue plastic case (5 feet by 3 feet). Inside are display materials on SAEG. If you have seen this board, or can help replace it, please call Cecily at 320-6393.

Partnering for our Future! Awards – The Oldman River Basin Water Quality Initiative is seeking nominations of a Basin resident or organization that makes an outstanding effort to help preserve or improve water quality in the Oldman River Basin. Two awards will be presented, one urban and one rural, at the March 2nd workshop. For more info and a nomination form visit www.oldmanbasin.org or phone 382-4239.

SAEG Provides Views on Urban Sprawl to Councils – On 19 January Sylvia Campbell made a presentation on behalf of SAEG to a joint public hearing of the City and County of Lethbridge regarding a proposed Intermunicipal Development Plan (Bylaw #5242). The submission was developed by Sylvia, Bill Brown and Cheryl Bradley. Copies can be obtained by contacting Sylvia at 328-6502.

The submission congratulated City Council on moving to a sustainability approach to environmental management, including hiring of an environmental manager, putting an environmental component in corporate business plans, and involving environmental interests in Economic Development Lethbridge. City Council also was recognized for its recent affordable housing initiatives which are directed towards greater urban density through the use of row housing, multi-family units and duplexes within already developed areas.

Concern was expressed about the creep of country residential lots and other development in the urban fringe, including south of Six Mile Coulee. “If the future reflects past trends, and the experience of other communities is an indication, we will eventually become an urban agglomeration with increased taxes, traffic, noise and air and water pollution unless we take steps now to stop sprawl and plan for smart growth”. It was noted that sprawl also leads to prime agricultural land being lost from production.

SAEG’s submission encouraged both councils to build their capacity for ensuring sound environmental information is considered in their decisions about growth. Capacity includes environmental expertise, environmental data bases and environmental policies and procedures. Reference materials to help councils address the environmental implications of urban fringe planning were provided.

Milk River Notes: • A Hotspot of Biodiversity - The Milk River Basin has a high number of species at risk - 46 in total - in a relatively small area. Because of this concentration it has been chosen as the first provincial project for planning multi-species conservation at the landscape level (MULTISAR). This is a joint project of Alberta Fish and Wildlife and the Alberta Conservation Association. Studies are underway to identify key habitats for species at risk, evaluate land use and recommend beneficial management practices. Landowners are invited to participate in establishing stewardship goals and activities. For more info call 382-4364.

• **Threatened Fish** - Western silvery minnow, a fish found in Canada only in the Milk River, has been assessed as ‘threatened’ by both national and provincial committees responsible for determining status of species at risk. A joint federal-provincial recovery team is being formed to determine future management to protect the species.

• **Storage Options Study** - A consultant’s report identifying the benefits, costs, and positive and negative impacts of on-stream and off-stream water storage options in the Milk

River Basin currently is being reviewed by staff of Alberta Environment and other government departments. The results are expected to be publicly available soon.

Appeal of Alberta Environment Decision re Water Licence – On November 24, 2003, SAEG filed a notice of appeal with Alberta’s Environmental Appeals Board regarding amendment of a water licence granted by Alberta Environment. The amendment, granted on October 30, allows the St. Mary River Irrigation District to allocate 12,000 acre feet of water for uses other than irrigation. These uses include commercial, industrial, municipal, recreation and habitat enhancement.

There are two key concerns. The first is that the amendment privatizes water. It gives a private irrigation board the authority to decide who will receive water and for what purpose and to make money from that use. According to the law, Irrigation Districts are considered ‘natural persons’ whose purpose primarily is to convey and deliver water through irrigation works. The Alberta Water Strategy and other public processes affirm that Albertans consider water to be a public resource and want it to remain that way. This means decisions about the use of water should be made by public authorities who are accountable to the public and who are required to consider the public interest. Handing this control over to a private board of irrigation farmers is a dangerous precedent.

The second concern is that this decision avoids returning water back to the southern tributaries of the Oldman River – the St. Mary, Belly and Waterton rivers. The southern tributaries of the Oldman River have been assessed by scientists as heavily impacted and degrading due to lack of water. In about five years out of ten, allocation volume exceeds total natural flow. Natural fish populations and riparian vegetation are dying. Current ‘minimum flows’ are not science-based and are inadequate. Further flow reductions are predicted due to climate change.

Recognizing the need to alleviate stress on the rivers, Alberta Environment closed the southern tributaries to further allocations in November 2002. At the same time Government enabled transfer of water allocations and water conservation holdbacks (10% of the volume). Transfers allow already allocated water to move to new demands while improving the aquatic environment. By amending the SMRID licence as it has, Alberta Environment is forgoing opportunities to return water to the stressed southern tributaries since transfers will not be approved by Government and water conservation holdbacks will not occur.

A Preliminary Meeting of the Environmental Appeals Board will be scheduled some time in March or April to determine the directly affected status of the appellants, any further preliminary issues raised by the parties, and the issues to be heard at a future hearing of this appeal should one be held.

SAEG’s meeting on Feb 5th at the Fish and Game Hut will inform members and others about the issues and will provide opportunity for showing support.

“The sage’s transformation of the World arises from solving the problem of water.” Lao Tze