

Demand grows for water from Red Deer River

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EDMONTON - Two water commissions in east-central Alberta want the provincial government to allow an interbasin water transfer from the Red Deer River to secure a reliable supply for residents.

The request for up to 7.8 billion litres of water annually - almost a third of the amount allocated to the city of Red Deer - is another example of mounting demands faced by the river.

As of late last year, the Red Deer River was at 62 per cent of its allocation limit, the threshold beyond which Alberta Environment stops giving out new licences.

But if pending applications are added, that figure jumps to 84 per cent, numbers put together by the Red Deer River Municipal Users Group indicate.

Alberta Environment is closely watching the situation. "We recognize the Red Deer River is not just an unlimited resource," said Erin Carrier, a department spokeswoman.

Pressure on the river increased after the Oldman and Bow rivers were closed to new licences last year.

The interbasin water transfer requested by the fledgling Shirley McClellan Regional Water Services Commission would take water from the Red Deer River through the Stettler's water treatment plant. Some of that water would end up in the Battle River basin.

The Water Act requires a special act of the legislature be passed to allow for interbasin transfer of water.

The proposed waterline would take treated water from Stettler and distribute it in different directions, said Wayne Richardson, the commission's interim chairman.

The current line the commission is working on would extend from Stettler about 145 kilometres east to Consort, he added. Its price tag is an estimated \$60 million. It could be complete by late fall 2008.

Ultimately, the commission wants the line extended from Consort to the Saskatchewan border, Richardson said. It would also branch out into other parts of east-central Alberta.

The commission's project is broken into different phases. The requested interbasin transfer would supply water for their needs and that of the Highway 12/21 Commission, which is building a line from Bashaw to Ferintosh this summer.

All of the water is intended for domestic and commercial uses, as well as for farmsteads, but not for irrigation, Richardson said.

"That total diversion should give us a supply, depending on population growth, for 25 to 50 years."

The drought of 2002 pushed communities more quickly towards this project when they found their well water was not as reliable as they thought.

The quantity and quality of the well water is an economic disincentive for development in their area, Richardson said.

Several communities in the northeast and east sectors of Stettler County, such as Donalda and Red Willow, have hardly any water or are desperate for water, said Tim Fox, chief administrative officer for the county.

"We would like to move as quickly and as fast as possible," he said. "We are putting money away annually to try to put water distribution in the county. We have to get the pipeline in first."

In Big Valley, which is not scheduled to get its portion of pipeline for another 10 years, reliability is the chief concern.

"We're lucky to have excellent water," said Shelagh Sisson, chief administrative officer for Big Valley. "The thing is we're drawing from three groundwater wells and with the amount of shallow methane drilling around here, those wells are at potential risk."

Other river users are not overly concerned about the commission's proposal.

Red Deer Mayor Morris Flewwelling said his city is supportive of using water from the Red Deer River for domestic and industrial purposes, but not for irrigation.

"There is capacity to be allocated, but there isn't capacity to be wasted," he said.

Generally, municipalities in the area support the movement of treated water to municipalities in close proximity to the basin, as long as there's no other viable alternative and a prospect of reasonable economic returns, said Bill Shaw, a water consultant who has advised municipalities in the Red Deer River basin for five years.

Shaw questioned the proposed Special Areas Water Supply Project which would use up to 76.5 billion litres of untreated Red Deer River water annually, largely for irrigation. He said large quantities of water would evaporate while travelling to its destination.

Provincial cabinet approved the Special Areas project in principle last December, said Jay Slempe, chairman of the Special Areas Board. But that was subject to an updated cost estimate and subject to regulatory approvals, such as an environmental impact assessment, he said. The assessment hasn't been done yet, but the new cost estimate is \$463 million, Slempe said. The funding has not yet been approved.

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