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## Water Rights for Sale in Alberta

Contributed by [macdonald](#) on Tue, 2007/02/06 - 1:54pm

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Introductory rant by Macdonald Stainsby

If you aren't cynical enough and want further proof that none of the Canadian political parties are serious about tackling climate change, the fact they never mention the tarsands shows that it is mostly for show.

When the recent document urging the five fold expansion of the tarsands was leaked through the CBC, this should have made it quite clear why this new water regime is necessary.

The world is running out of fresh water and Canada has lots of it.

The Athabasca River, running north from the Fort MacMurray area, has dropped several metres in just the short time that the tarsands operations have begun. If this five fold expansion happens-- or even if the current pace remains-- the agricultural farmers, never mind the nations who actually own the water or the marine life who live in it, will lose out completely. As this is only just beginning it is highly notable that the Athabasca River was once clear, yet the people who live along it now consider it poison.

All because the other resource is running out: we are now at peak oil, and if we know it, the oil companies knew long ago. They are prepared. These "water licenses" are more of the over-all trajectory.

By setting into motion the buying and selling of water licenses, eventually this is headed for a situation where farmers will all be squeezed out due to the "natural inclinations of the dollar". By portraying this move to sell licenses as a boon to the little struggling farmer (a logic similar to "cut them off welfare and you'll help them find a job") one misses the main point: The rising demand on this water

will leave no aquifers available for agriculture. The tarsands, all of whose final production goes straight to the US (and would remain so even after the suicidal plan to quintuple production), uses

five litres of the world's remaining fresh water to produce one litre of petroleum (and a bucket of useless poison muck).

This petrol is already a horrible return on energy, after the whole process of excavation, steaming muck off the goo, transport and sale-- to then burn somewhere in the lower 48 and increase CO2 levels (i.e. climate change).

Politicians in Ottawa are yapping at us about global warming, yet at the same time we have this water disappearing. Should indigenous nations who own it, small farmers who need it and all of the people living in Alberta who drink it lose their water to the highest bidder so Suncor and the other energy corporations can rape the earth to feed the imperial war machine?

Q: How is it that the author of this article could somehow miss where this is all leading? What exactly are we being fed here, anyhow? Private water for oil companies, massive cancer rates for indigenous nations and climate change for all else?

Is not their silence a level of measure of their guilt-- not to mention their plan? How else but through a bidding war can corporations "guiltlessly" take public water and waste it for the American energy market?

Macdonald

Water Rights for Sale in Alberta

Published: Monday, February 05, 2007  
The Calgary Herald

Cattle rancher Harold Halvorson would walk about the land he loves, the only part of Alberta he's ever known as home, consumed in bleakness.

He didn't always feel this way, but at times this long, flat stretch of prairie was so brittle and parched, it was hard to think of anything else.

"We couldn't even grow flowers," he said, thinking back to just a few years ago.

"It made things pretty bleak around here because we never had anything green except when it rained."

That doesn't happen often in this corner of southern Alberta, tucked between Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, a horizon ending at the U.S. border.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in Alberta, farmers here know what it means to live with a limited supply of water. Their harsh experiences with the land drew them to the province's fledgling water market -- the first of its kind in Canada.

The market to buy and sell licences to access water has changed their lives, 65-year-old Halvorson says.

To the 123 farmers and 15 Hutterite colonies that banded together to enter the market, it's delivered water for drinking, improved the health of pigs and cattle, and allowed people to grow green grass and plant flowers.

"It's a godsend in this part of the country," Halvorson said.

But that godsend came with a hefty cost: nearly \$23 million -- \$780,000 of which was paid to the United Irrigation District for a share of its water licence.

In southern Alberta, where a moratorium has been placed on new requests to tap into rivers, water -- once free for the taking with government approval -- now comes at a cost.

And that cost is expected to escalate as Alberta's water market matures, its population and economy continues to rapidly expand, and the warming earth keeps zapping more of its water.

In short, demands are growing for a dwindling supply, and already too many people have been given a share of southern Alberta's water.

As the provincial government works on enhancing its management of the resource, its environment department is considering whether everyone -- municipalities, farmers, the oil and gas industry -- should start paying for the water they take.

Currently, users pay only for treatment and infrastructure such as pipelines.

A report examining the merits of introducing economic instruments, including water pricing, is slated to head to Environment Minister Rob Renner later this year. Other jurisdictions with established water markets, such as Australia, California and Texas, are being looked at.

"Obviously, I think there's room for a lot of creativity when we talk about how we are going to manage that limited resource into the future," Renner told the Herald.

"I would welcome those kinds of suggestions but, at this point in time, I haven't seen anything, and so I can't comment one way or another on whether I like them or not."

In Calgary last Wednesday, water pricing was the topic of discussion at a town hall forum organized by Liberal environment critic MLA David Swann.

Water has become a defining issue in the province's south, Swann told the 150 residents who gathered at Renfrew Community Centre.

He pointed to the controversy over a request from the Municipal District of Rocky View to use water from the Red Deer River for a mega entertainment complex rising on the northern fringes of Calgary.

The Liberals and politicians and businesses from the Red Deer region strongly oppose the request.

"Rapid growth has placed enormous pressures on our water," Swann said.

"We have already over-allocated the Bow and Oldman rivers."

Alberta's water market was created to address some of those pressures.

The drought of 2001 made it clear the province's southern rivers were overtaxed. People with newer water licences were cut off because there wasn't enough water to go around.

While moratoriums on new licences were introduced last August for all southern rivers except Red Deer, few people have waded into the water market.

Alberta Environment has approved 22 water licence transfers, all but one in the Lethbridge area. But only seven of those transfers have been between two parties. and not all for money.

The southwestern Alberta villages of Hillspring and Glenwood, for instance, received ownership of their water licences from the United Irrigation District at no cost because they already had a long-standing agreement with the district for water.

That wasn't the case for the southeastern group of farmers.

Negotiations went back and forth, Halvorson recalled, before a price of \$780,000 for the transfer was settled on.

In all, getting the licence, setting up a water co-op and building 900 kilometres of pipeline to deliver water cost \$23 million, split three ways between the provincial and federal governments and the co-op's farmers.



The bill for each farmer: \$26,000. The ongoing cost: \$2 a day for water.

The project has been worth every penny, Halvorson said. Good water in this parched corner of Alberta is scarce, even underground.

"If we think we've paid a lot for water now, just wait 10 years and see what we'll be paying," he said.

"We've got water that we've never had before. That security of having the water is really something to us."

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