

For more than 120 years, ranching families have been stewarding the Eastern Slopes of southern Alberta. Prior to that it was under the purveyance of the Blackfoot Confederacy. In 1877, Chief Crowfoot was asked by the Federal Government if he would sell his people's land for a great sum of money. He responded something like this: "You say your money is worth a lot. If I throw a handful of your money and a handful of our land into the fire, which will last? You want me to sell my people's land for something that will perish in a small campfire?" The wisdom and weight of the metaphor is directly applicable to the situation faced by Albertans today. Petro-Canada is offering Albertans a sum of money, in the form of royalties and other spinoffs, if we allow their sour gas pipeline through a unique natural area.

The Pekisko Group is comprised of ranching families whose roots run deep into the birth of the cattle industry and the very foundation of this province. We reside in this area of the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. We're using our passion for the land and our after-tax dollars, to protect this special area of Southern Alberta. We're speaking up for future generations of Albertans.

We don't want to villainize Petro-Canada. We appreciate entrepreneurial drive to secure and protect their bottom line. They are using tax deductible dollars to create a profitable situation for their shareholders. Petro-Canada wants to introduce themselves into an area, currently devoid of industrial activity, and they insist their mitigation strategies will allow their sour gas pipeline to fit into this unfragmented, natural environment.

We beg to differ. Reclamation is not restoration. Mitigation is not protection. Their pipeline with its 20 meter right-of-way, will cross a river, creeks and seasonal streams for 56 kilometers, from the Highwood River south to the Chain Lakes area: some 72 channels. This is one of Alberta's most important and ecologically sensitive watersheds, supplying water to the driest areas of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The potential impact of the pipeline goes far beyond the trenching. The proposed area for the pipeline is mainly inaccessible by vehicle. We've seen this pattern before; once development starts there's no stopping it. Everywhere a pipeline goes so do weeds, motorbikes, ATVs, trespass, clearcuts, more wells, more roads, and more industrialization. In the Southern Foothills Study, Dr. Brad Stelfox warns that cumulative impacts, on our watershed and wildlife, will be far reaching.

Pekisko Creek delivers more water in flood, than flows through the Bow River during this time of the year. Tinker with the Pekisko's headwaters and one June we'll wake up and a town called High River will be an Alberta Atlantis.

Biologist and provincial riparian specialist, Lorne Fitch, testified last week there are only two areas remaining in the foothills of Southern Alberta, that do not have industrial fragmentation. One is the Whaleback (protected by the Heritage Rangeland designation) and the other is this headwaters area, under threat by Petro-Canada. Fitch said: "The pipeline would mean the loss of this area."

So what, you might ask, if the West Slope Cutthroat Trout is driven to extinction in this headwaters area? So what if this watershed becomes eroded and fragmented. So what if our wolf and grizzly habitat is encroached upon? The shifting of benchmarks with each successive generation will result in less and less, until like the canary in the coal mine, our environmental health indicators will be snuffed out. Then of course, so will we.

It's the responsibility of our government to protect Alberta's few remaining special places. The government has initiated the Alberta Land Use Framework, and thousands of Albertans have invested in the process. It will eventually result in a Land Use Plan. In the meantime, the ERCB is ruling on applications within the confines of obsolete regulations, that do not serve the public interest. If we can't trust the ERCB is up to protecting the public interest, then it's up to us. This landscape warrants protection and the benefits rightly remain with Albertans, present and future.

This is not ranchers versus oil. It's Canadians standing up for a special place. It's a place of expansive beauty, wildlife habitat, healthy rangeland and an intact watershed. Nature's services are priceless and their grace and functionality can not be replicated by all the engineers of this world. This is God's canvas. If we let it slip away, we will be depriving future generations of a priceless asset.

Chief Crowfoot knew the value of this land versus a sum of money. The Pekisko Group concurs. The protection of this watershed is in the best interest of Albertans and Canadians.