

Irrigation proposal a slippery slope for Albertans

from bowriverkeepers

A proposal before Alberta Environment would give the largest water license holder in all of southern Alberta the role of water broker. The Eastern Irrigation District (EID) located in southern Alberta has asked Alberta Environment for an amendment to its water allocation originally granted in 1903. If granted, the amendment would allow the EID to deal out water to uses other than irrigation or agriculture and become water barons, selling water for any use. **The deal would serve as a precedent for other water licenses who are now limited to use water only for the purpose in which it was originally granted.**

EID is seeking to amend two of its water licenses, which, read together, would affect 762,000 acre feet (up to 30% of Bow River annual flows) diverted at the Bassano Dam in Bassano, Alberta. The purpose of the current licenses is for "irrigation and agriculture (stock-watering) purposes." The proposed new uses will be for "municipal, agricultural, commercial, industrial, management of fish, management of wildlife, habitat enhancement, and/or recreation." If granted, this amendment would make the water available for any of these purposes. Essentially, it would give the EID a blank cheque to sell its water for any non-irrigation purpose.

The EID holds the largest water allocation on the Bow River, accounting for over one third of the flow of the river. On average, the EID only uses 76 percent of their allocated water. Some years, they use less than half of their allocation. Given the size of the EID allocation, the "unused" portion of their water (which would be available for "reallocation") would be considered fairly sizeable, even in water short years.

The agreement would give the EID greater flexibility to allocate the "unused" portions of their license to other uses within the EID — a very large area comprising 1.5 million acres. But, without understanding how the EID intends to "reallocate" water under an amended license, it is difficult to determine how it would impact the public, the environment, or the economy.

Time for a change?

Rather than give irrigation districts the power to allocate water in any way they choose, we should be rethinking our entire system of water allocation. Our century-old system doesn't allow us to strike a balance between meeting basic human needs in this booming province, protecting environmental flows, and considering the effects of global climate change and drought.

By approving the amendment, Alberta Environment would be giving away the keys to a substantial quantity of water, making it an excellent deal for the EID who receives their enormous water allocation at no cost. Is it fair that irrigation districts could now turn around and sell that same water for profit?

Bypassing the Transfer System

In 2006, the government closed the Bow River basin to new water licenses citing the over-allocation of the river. To assure water is made available to new users or expanding municipalities, the government created a regulated market. This regulated market, called a "transfer system", brings social and environmental considerations into account, allows for public input, and encourages the "return" of 10 percent of the transferred water back to the river.

If granted, this amendment would create a loophole by allowing the EID to bypass the transfer system. It would prevent the government from withholding some water for the public good and for environmental use, as would happen if the EID used the new transfer system. With over 75% of the Bow's water licenses going to irrigators, this amendment would set a dangerous precedent. It would open the door to a more unregulated market and prevent water from being returned to this highly allocated river.