

Oilsands use of water threatens river flows: expert

Ecologist's paper one of 60 to be debated by prominent Canadians, mayors and aboriginal leaders at U of A

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Water use by the oilsands industry is on a collision course with river flows, says a new paper by aquatics ecologist David Schindler.

The paper was one of two being debated at the University of Alberta Thursday by 60 prominent Canadians, including the mayors of Edmonton and Fort McMurray and the leaders of First Nation federations.

Flows in the Athabasca River have been well below average for most years since 1980, says Schindler's paper, which was co-authored by Bill Donahue and John Thompson.

The scientists are concerned that current government regulations for water withdrawal from the river do not adequately protect fish and other organisms. "The Athabasca system shows evidence of being unusually sensitive to very high and very low flow conditions," the paper says.

Current regulations are ineffective at protecting the ecosystems in the Athabasca River because they don't take into account the potential impact of climate change and the importance of high-flow conditions, which some species of fish require to spawn, the report says.

Using predictions from several global climate models, one scientist had already projected a decrease in runoff from the Athabasca River basin below Fort McMurray of about 30 per cent by the middle of this century.

Schindler says regulations should be based on more precise knowledge of the needs of the river ecosystems.

The other paper, by rural economist Vic Adamowicz, suggests a combination of charging for water and trading of water rights could help avoid potential economic and environmental problems posed by heavy water use in the Athabasca River basin.

Adamowicz points out there are few incentives, beyond reducing private costs, for companies to develop and adopt new water-saving technologies. In the absence of a cap on water use, he says, a combination of a seasonally adjusted water charges and development of storage reservoirs may be able to achieve the water quantity goals by providing incentives for conservation.

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