



ALBERTA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



Government of Canada

Canadian Impact Assessment Registry

IAAC.GrassyMountain.AEIC@canada.ca

July 20, 2020

Subject: Grassy Mountain Coal Mine Proposed by Benga Mining Ltd. Application # 1844520 – Canadian Impact Registry 80101

To Whom it May Concern,

The Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (ACTWS) and the Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society are non-profit organizations representing over 700 wildlife professionals across Alberta and Canada. Our mission is to inspire and empower wildlife professionals to engage in science-based management and conservation of animals and their habitats. We are affiliated with The Wildlife Society, the largest organization of wildlife professional in the world. ACTWS members live and work across Alberta; some of them will be directly affected by the Grassy Mountain Coal Mine, either professionally or personally.

ACTWS members are concerned with the Grassy Mountain Coal Mine proposed by Benga Mining Ltd. This Mine is located adjacent to tributaries of the Crowsnest River (Blairmore and Gold Creek) in southwestern Alberta, an area covered by the Livingstone/Porcupine Hills Sub-Regional Plan (LPSRP) and the overarching South Saskatchewan Regional Plan. This area is known for its recreational opportunities, cattle grazing lands, and fish and wildlife resources. Most importantly, the area is important for its major contribution to water quality and quantity for southern Alberta, providing clean and abundant drinking water for over one million Albertans. The LPSRP indicates that “land managers and regulators must operate with a common objective to minimize footprint”. This responsibility is to be reinforced through integrated management, the precautionary principle and evidence-based decision making.

The Grassy Mountain mine is anticipated to be actively mining for 24 years and encompass 2800 hectares (ha). The LPSRP designated this area as important for westslope cutthroat trout and grizzly bears, respectively listed as Threatened and Special Concern under the Federal Species at Risk Act. It also provides important range for elk, mountain goats and bighorn sheep. The direct removal of habitats for these species will further impact a landscape that in many areas already exceeds linear disturbance thresholds for grizzly bears and westslope cutthroat trout. The Alberta Ministry of Environment and Parks is compelled to recover species that are listed at risk; yet this coal project will hinder existing government efforts and programs to recover these species, further compromising conservation efforts.

Alberta’s Land-use Framework (2008) consists of seven strategies including “cumulative effects management (that) will be used at the regional level to manage the impacts of development on land, water and air”. The LPSRP indicates that a Cumulative Effects Management Decision Tool will be used by the three land-use agencies (Alberta Energy Regulator, Alberta Environment and Parks, Alberta Agriculture and Forestry) to evaluate new projects in terms of cumulative effects management



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indicators and thresholds. We do not believe a sufficient cumulative effects assessment (CEA) has been completed, and therefore it is premature to consider this mining proposal. The proponent's attempt at assessing Cumulative Effects is, in our opinion, woefully inadequate. For example, the study area for wildlife species used by the proponent is only a 25 km radius from the mine footprint whereas the precedence set for grizzly bears during the Cheviot Coal Mining hearings south of Hinton, Alberta included a significant portion of Bear Management Area 3 (BMA 3) and the adjacent portion of Jasper National Park, a significantly larger area. As a minimum, it is more realistic to include the southern half of BMA 5 and the northern portion of BMA 6 in the CEA for grizzly bears relative to the Grassy Mountain Coal Mining Proposal.

Wildlife scientists from across North America, including our members, and the Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) initiative have long held the conviction that habitat connectivity is essential to perpetuate gene flow of many species of wildlife, particularly large carnivores. The Crowsnest Pass is a significant "habitat bottleneck" given the narrow band of mountains bordered on open rangelands to the east and the heavily mined Elk Valley in BC to the west. Many studies have shown that forested cover is essential to maintain essential habitat connectivity for species such as grizzly bears and wolverine. It is difficult to grow trees on reclaimed mines because of the thin layer of topsoil that is placed back on the surface and it may take a century before forests are restored. The ACTWS has recently released a Cumulative Effects evaluation of the C5 Forest Management Unit conducted by ALCES^{TM1}. The timber harvest and historical mining activity that has occurred in the watershed, combined with the existing access development already puts westslope cutthroat trout in this watershed in a precarious position. Expert reviews have concluded habitat protection measures proposed by the proponent will not allow maintenance of westslope cutthroat trout populations in streams adjacent to mining operations and will lead to significant negative impacts to those populations, including extirpation. In addition, the proposed mitigation plans are inadequate to compensate for the impacts of a mountain-top removal coal mine and are largely unworkable in streams adjacent to mining operations. This coal mine will exceed responsible conservation requirements for westslope cutthroat trout and grizzly bears and be a significant impact on recovery efforts. We sent a letter to the Alberta Minister of Environment and Parks on June 30, 2020 outlining our insights from this modelling exercise but have yet to receive a response. We are concerned that the provincial government is not placing a priority on these issues and we believe that it is incumbent on the Government of Canada to act responsibly through its mandate under the Species at Risk Act.

Moreover, the Eastern Slopes in southwestern Alberta provides essential downstream water resources for 45% of Albertans. A Policy for Resource Management of the Eastern Slopes (1978, modified in 1984) has long recognized that watershed management is the primary consideration for the mountains and foothills of Alberta. The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan has reinforced this watershed management

¹ A copy of this report was included with this letter as part of our formal email submission. . The report has also been posted to our website and can be downloaded via [this link](#).



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priority. Selenium effluent leaching into streams from coal mining activities continues to be unmanageable throughout Alberta despite research efforts over the last 20 years and will negatively impact the aquatic environment and fish populations with new coal developments. This also constitutes a very real risk to human health. Most recently, the US Environmental Protection Agency demanded that the BC Government provide data explaining why Teck Resources coal mines in southern BC are allowed to exceed guidelines for toxic metals, particularly selenium (May 11, 2020 Toronto City News). Teck Coal has spent over \$650 million dollars on efforts to mitigate the selenium problem with no appreciable effect. The Teck mines are located immediately adjacent to the Crowsnest watershed on the west side of the Continental Divide and the BC government has a responsibility to our neighbors in the United States to maintain requirements for water quality. Alberta has the same responsibility to our neighbors to the south and the east through its transboundary obligations under the Master Agreement on Apportionment and the Boundary Waters Treaty.

Additionally, we argue that the approval of this mine would contradict the Government of Canada's commitment to Climate Change by 2030. The production of coal at this facility will increase Alberta's greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the metallurgical coal produced will be burned elsewhere. Regardless of what jurisdiction coal from this mine is used, it will add to global greenhouse gas emissions. Recent advancements in Sweden for manufacturing steel using hydrogen provides a responsible alternative to coal and one that Canada should endorse and support. Natural gas is one of the best fuels for producing hydrogen and Alberta has a vast supply of it.

Finally, Section 3.2.3 of the LPSRP includes the strategy of "coordinated access planning (and subsequent approval) of energy and mining activity will meet thresholds established in the Plan". Additionally, the Plan indicates that "within one year of the effective date of this Plan, thresholds to guide spatial human footprint until 2045 will be developed". Ultimately, since the 1976 Coal Policy for Alberta has been rescinded, there has been an inherent "duty to consult" which has not occurred.

Consequently, we believe it is premature to consider a coal mining proposal of this nature given that:

1. Neither the proponent, nor the Government of Alberta have addressed cumulative effects in a meaningful way.
2. There are several threatened species that are in jeopardy when considering the Grassy Mountain Coal mining proposal in combination with the land-use activities already on the landscape.
3. Watershed management is the highest priority for the Eastern Slopes and coal mining will be adding selenium to the Crowsnest River watershed – an issue without a solution.
4. Proposed water requirements for coal mining may create issues with maintenance of flows required for a healthy aquatic environment and fish populations.
5. The precautionary principle and evidence-based decision-making supports denying this application.



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6. Since the 1976 Coal Policy has been rescinded, the provincial government has not fulfilled their duty to consult.
7. The coal mining proposal will further compromise gene flow of threatened species by eliminating forest cover in the narrow corridor that is essential for large carnivore movement.
8. Additional coal mining will continue to undermine Canada's commitment to Climate Change by 2030.

We request that you bring this information to the attention of the Review Committee responsible for the Grassy Mountain Coal Mining Hearings.

Respectively submitted,

Mark Boyce,
Conservation Affairs Committee Chair,
Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society

Dennis Brannen,
President,
Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society

cc. Rachael Notley, Leader of the Opposition
Irfan Sabir, Energy Critic
Marlin Schmidt, Environment Critic