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Water troubles looming in Alberta

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A report suggests that while Canada doesn't face a water crisis to the extent other countries do, the province of Alberta could encounter problems with water in the future.

The report, which was released recently, is based on information gathered at the Rosenberg International Forum on Water Policy in Banff last September.

It points to agriculture's heavy reliance on water, rapidly growing populations in the province, increased demand from cities and industry, reduced flows in important water courses and unpredictable climate as contributing to a possible scarcity of water.

"Upland watershed protection will become more and more important as population growth, diminishment of water supply and climate change conspire to change the hydrology of the Canadian West," the report states.

Dianne Pachal, the Alberta Wild director Sierra Club of Canada, said the main focus of the Water for Life Strategy — the provincial plan for water in Alberta — is conservation and the allocation of water.

"But there is a third important thing and that is where the water is coming from. You can't assume building dams and reservoirs is going to give you water. You've got to look at what's actually creating the water and that's the Eastern Slopes of Alberta," Pachal said. Pachal said the Castle area is particularly important because even though it's less than four per cent of the land area for the whole Oldman River Basin it provides 30 per cent of the recorded water flow for the whole basin.

"If there's any place to protect and restore for the sake of water supply, it's the Castle area," Pachal said.

"We're going to be facing water scarcity. We've got to spend more time collectively as a society protecting the headwaters."

The Sierra Club of Canada and other environmental groups have asked the

provincial government to turn the Castle into the Andy Russell-I'tai sah kop Wildland Park. The 1,040-square-kilometre area north of Waterton Lakes National Park, is designated as multi-use area with everything from logging and oil and gas development to recreational activities going on.

"There is no assessment of all the cumulative effects of all the activities, all the allocations, including on our water supply," Pachal said.

The Rosenberg report suggests that "Given that water scarcity has already been identified as a potentially limiting factor in the economic and social development of southern Alberta it may be important to re-assess the value of upland areas in the context of water supply and the ecological services they provide."

Pachal said the Sierra Club of Canada and other supporters have sent letters to ministers and MLAs but so far they've been told the area is not under consideration to become a park at this time.