Media Release – Bighill Creek Preservation Society

Appeal for the Protection of Big Hill Springs Provincial Park
Gravel Mine Hearing: Beaupre Hall Oct 28-30, and online Nov 4-5

The Alberta Environmental Appeals Board will hear an appeal of a Water Act approval allowing Aecon Transportation West Ltd. to mine gravel 800 meters from Big Hill Springs Provincial Park. The mine would excavate up to 25 meters of gravel from 208 acres (84 hectares), leaving only one meter of gravel to protect groundwater which is the life blood of the Park. It would be the third of potentially five mines industrialising 1,300 acres adjacent the Park.

Bighill Creek Preservation Society is participating in this appeal to provide evidence to demonstrate this approval would place the Park, its thermal/mineral spring and tufa formations, both nationally ranked, at risk of irreparable harm. The Society's extensive research and significant knowledge of the area securely positions the Society to question the decision to issue the Water Act approval to allow this mine to proceed.

The Society will present the work of subject experts at the appeal to show that these risks to groundwater have been inadequately evaluated by Alberta Environment and Protected Areas in relation to the highly valued Big Hill Springs Provincial Park, one of Alberta's oldest and most-cherished provincial parks. Historiographical research confirms that Alberta parks officials have long recognized the Park's fragile environment in respect to its sources of spring fed waters, their purity, and their importance to the Park's unique flora and fauna. The record shows the Alberta Government has made several unsuccessful attempts to acquire surrounding lands to protect the Park from encroaching development.

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas received 255 written statements from the public, and a petition with 11,487 signatures, raising concerns with the gravel mine, the Water Act approval, and the risk of harm to the Park.

The Society's overall position is that the risk and irreparable nature of foreseeable harm to the groundwater aquifer requires that no gravel mining should be permitted within 1.6 kilometers of the Park and any mine located within an additional 1.6 kilometers from this setback should be required to leave at least 4 meters of undisturbed gravel above the groundwater table.

Legal counsel for the Society in this appeal, Professor Shaun Fluker with the University of Calgary Public Interest Law Clinic, says "Alberta Environment and Protected Areas has failed to meet its legal obligation to apply the precautionary principle to address the risk of irreparable harm to the Park".

While the Society recognizes infrastructure for a growing population requires gravel, the Society's President, Gerry Bietz says, "Gravel is an abundant resource that must be developed where it won't place valuable environmental assets like Big Hill Springs Provincial Park at foreseeable risk of irreparable harm."

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