
Volume 2, Section 15 Snake Lake Reservoir Expansion Project Environmental Impact Assessment Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Traditional Land Use

Submitted to:



a division of Englobe

Lethbridge, Alberta

On Behalf of:



Eastern Irrigation District

Brooks, Alberta

Submitted by:



AAR Environmental Services

Calgary, Alberta



March 31, 2025

AARES Project #: 21-127

Executive Summary

The Eastern Irrigation District (EID) is applying for approval under the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA) to construct the proposed Snake Lake Reservoir (SLR) Expansion Project (the Project). The Project, located between Bassano and Brooks, Alberta, involves the construction of a roughly 8 km long, up to 20 m high dam to increase the storage capacity of the existing reservoir system from 19.25 million m³ to 87.4 million m³. The SLR expansion Project is located within Treaty 7, which is home to the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Stoney Nakoda Nations (Chiniki, Bearpaw, Goodstoney), and the Métis Nation of Alberta Region 4. The Siksika Nation Reserve (Siksika #146) is located approximately 22 km northwest and is the closest First Nation Reserve to the Project.

This report provides a summary of information gathered to understand Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Traditional Land Use (TLU) by Indigenous Peoples with traditional territories that may overlap the Project, focusing on the Blackfoot Confederacy and more specifically, the Siksika Nation. The Aboriginal Consultation Office (ACO) provided a File Number for Consultation (FNC) response that “no consultation is required for the ... environmental impact assessment report,” as the Project area is privately owned. The EID reached out to Siksika Nation and the public on multiple occasions to discuss Project details, but no response has been received to date (see Public and Indigenous Engagement Volume 1, Section 12 for more details). Considering the ACO response, and that the Project lands are privately owned, there has been no formal TEK and TLU study for the Project area or surrounding lands.

The extant reservoir is under license to the EID. Per the EID's Public Access Policy, the EID owned or managed lands may be accessed by members of the public, including Indigenous Peoples. The lands for the reservoir expansion are privately held and are not accessible to the public, except for a road allowance along Range Road 165. The road allowance is currently in the process of being closed and leased to the EID. Public access to the Project area will remain restricted until the new reservoir is constructed and becomes operational.

For information on Traditionally Used (TU) plants, refer to the Vegetation and Wetlands assessment (Volume 2, Section 10). For TU Wildlife species, refer to the Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat assessment (Volume 2, Section 11). Native grasslands which surround much of the Project area will continue to maintain TU plant species; thus residual effects on TU plants were assessed as Neutral. The residual effects of the Project on TU wildlife species were not assessed as this resource was scoped as being applicable only for Baseline description (see Volume 2, Section 11). It is expected that habitat for TU wildlife species will be increased locally for species that occur in open water habitat and will be decreased locally, for species that occur in native prairie habitat, but that the species will continue to occur in the lands and areas surrounding the Project. No changes to hunting or trapping within the Project area will occur as these activities are not currently allowed and will continue to be prohibited. It is uncertain which fish species may be considered as Traditional Use species, but it is expected there will be an increase in area for fishing (and potential increases in catch) by Indigenous and non-Indigenous anglers. The expanded SLR and surrounding lands will result in an increase in areas that can be accessed for potential Traditional Uses, compared to Baseline. This increase in access is supported by EID's Public Land Access policy and will continue long term as the reservoir will be a permanent feature.

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Abbreviations

Alberta EPA	Alberta Environment and Protected Areas
ACO	Aboriginal Consultation Office
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EID	Eastern Irrigation District
EPEA	<i>Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act</i>
FNC	File Number for Consultation
GOA	Government of Alberta
GOC	Government of Canada
SLR	Snake Lake Reservoir
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
TLSA	Terrestrial Local Study Area
TRSA	Terrestrial Regional Study Area
TLU	Traditional Land Use
TU	Traditionally Used / Traditional Use

15.1 INTRODUCTION

15.1.1 Background

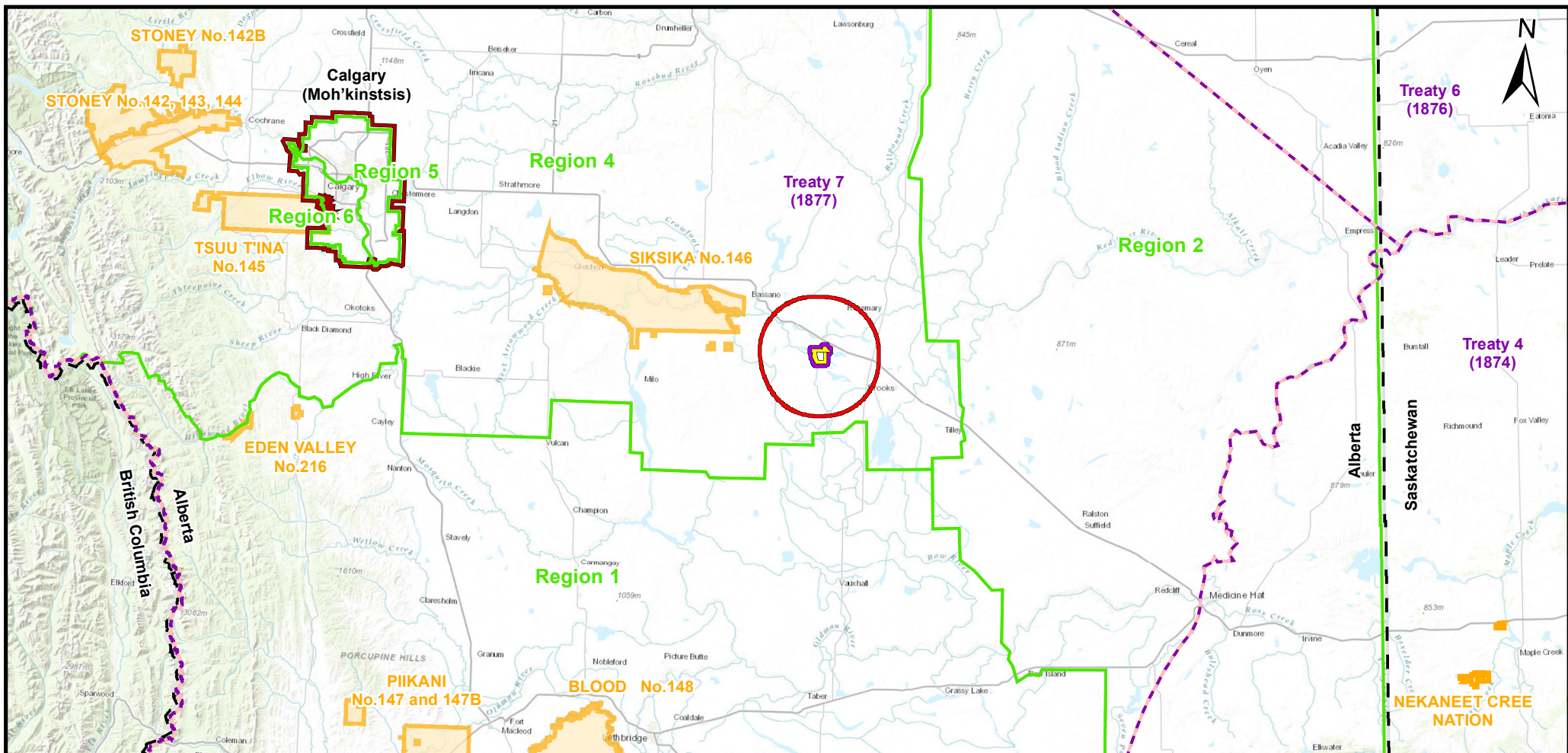
Snake Lake Reservoir (SLR) is located within Townships 19 and 20, Ranges 16 and 17 and Townships 65 and 66 and Ranges 1 and 2, W4M. The Eastern Irrigation District (EID) is applying for approval under the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA) to construct the proposed Snake Lake Reservoir (SLR) Expansion Project (the Project). The Project, located between Bassano and Brooks, Alberta, involves the construction of a roughly 8 km long, up to 20 m high dam to increase the storage capacity of the reservoir system from 19.25 million m³ to 87.4 million m³. The Trans-Canada Highway is 2 km north from the Project and the Canadian Pacific Kansas City rail line is next to the northeast boundary of the site.

The Project is located within Treaty 7, which is home to the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Stoney Nakoda Nations (Chiniki, Bearpaw, Goodstoney), and the Métis Nation of Alberta Region 4. There are 11 First Nation Reserves located within 200 km of the Project (Figure 15-1; Table 15-1). Most of these Reserves are on Treaty 7 land in Alberta. The Nekaneet Cree Nation Reserve (No. 380) is on Treaty 4 land, in Saskatchewan (Figure 15-1). The closest First Nation reserve is the Siksika Nation Reserve (Siksika No. 146), which is approximately 22 km northwest of the Project. The next closest Reserve is the Kainai Nation Reserve (Blood No. 148), located 113 km from the Project area (Table 15-1).

Given a previous working relationship between the EID and the Siksika Nation (i.e., previous work on the Bassano Dam near the Town of Bassano), and the proximity of the Project to the Siksika Nation Reserve, parts of this report, as well as EID actions with respect to Indigenous engagement (see Volume 1, Section 12), has focused predominantly on Siksika Nation.

Table 15-1: Distance of First Nation Reserves to the Project

First Nation	Reserve No.	Distance to Project (km)
Siksika Nation Reserve	146	21.7
Kainai Nation Reserve (Blood)	148	113.5
Tsuut'ina Nation Reserve (Tsuu t'ina)	145	139.8
Piikani Nation Reserve	147	140.1
The Bearspaw Nation Reserve (Eden Valley)	216	143.2
Piikani Nation Reserve	147B	158.0
Stoney Nation Reserve	142, 143, and 144	171.4
Stoney Nation Reserve	142B	189.1
Nekaneet Cree Nation Reserve	380	196.3



SCALE: 1:1,600,000

20 0 20 40 KM

Drafted: MM Date: Mar 13, 2025
Approved: VL Revision: 0
Route Source: Date: Feb 14, 2022
KML Revision: 0

Data Sources:
ESRI World Topographic Map
ATS Grid: AltaLIS 2007.

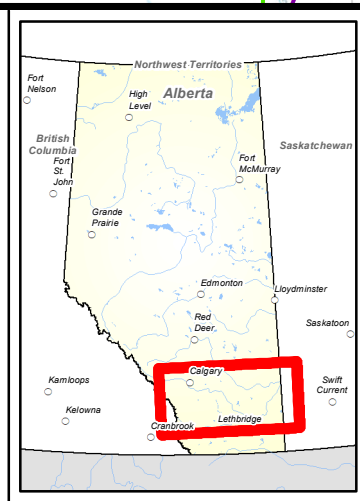
AAR
Environmental Services

Please contact AARES for all other sources.

Please note that the topographic map is from 2010 (NRCAN) and although we have no reason to doubt the accuracy and completeness of it, users should be aware discrepancies may be present.

Legend

- Snake Lake Reservoir Expansion Project Area
- First Nation Indian Reserve
- City Boundary
- Treaty Boundary
- Alberta Métis Nation Region Boundary
- Provincial Border
- Terrestrial Regional Study Area
- Terrestrial Local Study Area



EID

Indigenous Communities in Southern Alberta and Saskatchewan

March 2025

REF.: AARES21-127 (TEKSection)

Figure 15-1

Formal TEK studies have not been completed for this Project, as explained below. This section of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) provides a summary of information from publicly available knowledge and secondary sources of information that is intended to provide a general understanding of likely TEK and TLU by Indigenous Peoples of the region. Because this report focuses on publicly available information, it is unlikely to capture the depth of a TEK study on the area; there have likely been additional TU studies by Indigenous groups that are not captured in this report.

15.1.2 Project Setting

The Project is located within the Dry Mixedgrass Natural Subregion in the Grassland Natural Region of Alberta (Government of Alberta [GOA], 2006). Droughts occur every few years and result from prolonged reduced precipitation and/or a sustained water deficit when evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation. Much of the region consists of native grassland, which is predominantly used for livestock grazing, as was the case in the Project area, until recently. Numerous wetlands are also located in the Project area. Additional details on the ecological characteristics of the Project setting are found in the Soil and Terrain (Volume 2, Section 9), Vegetation and Wetlands (Volume 2, Section 10), Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat (Volume 2, Section 11), and Land Use and Management (Volume 2, Section 13) sections of the EIA.

Prior to European contact, Indigenous groups in the grasslands of what is now Alberta included Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Piikani (Piegan) and Gros Ventre (now in Montana) (Siksika Nation, 2025). Other groups, including the Ktunaxa (Kootenay) and the Crow, made expeditions into the grasslands to hunt buffalo (Smithsonian Institute, 2018; Ktunaxa Nation, 2025). The Tsuut'ina occupied central and western parts of what is now Alberta, while the north was occupied by the Slavey (Smith, 1999; Tsuut'ina Nation, 2025).

Historically, all needs of Indigenous Peoples, including requirements for food, shelter, and spiritual needs, would have been supplied by the wildlife, plants, and mineral materials within their traditional territories. Plains People, like the Siksika Nation, relied on seasonal fruits, vegetables and game for subsistence, as well as nuts, roots, fish, and bison meat (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2019). Sites with good hunting would be used for temporary camp sites and Indigenous groups would move around the Plains Region and occasionally into the foothills to the west in pursuit of game. Camps often included use of tipis made from long logs gathered in forested areas and transported to site. Cultural and spiritual sites were also present and visited by Indigenous Peoples throughout the Plains (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2019).

Eleven numbered treaties were signed from 1871 to 1921. These were agreements that set out the terms of relationships between the Canadian Government and the Nations living within the treaty boundaries. The creation of treaties involved the establishment of Indian (First Nation) Reserves and the relocation of Indigenous Peoples to these reserves, while ceding rights to the remainder of their traditional territory (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2023). Treaty 7 was signed on September 22, 1877, by five First Nations: The Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Piikani (Piegan), Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina (Sarcee). The written treaty ceded roughly 130,000 km² of land from the Rocky Mountains to the west, the Cypress Hills to the east, the Red Deer River to the north, and the United States border to the south. Although First Nations maintained hunting

and other TU rights, under Treaty 7, in practice this has been restricted to Crown (i.e., public) land. The Project area is made up of private land owned by the EID but also includes public land in the form of a road allowance for Range Road 165 which traverses the planned expansion.

15.1.3 Regulatory Context

The Final Terms of Reference (FTOR; Volume 2, Appendix A) for the Project identifies that:

3. *If consultation with Indigenous groups reveals traditional use areas and spiritual sites within lands affected by the Project, provide:*
 - a) *a map and description of traditional land use areas including fishing, hunting, trapping, water use (e.g., for drinking, cooking and navigation) and nutritional, medicinal, or cultural plant harvesting by affected Indigenous Peoples (if the Indigenous community or group is willing to have these locations disclosed); and*
 - b) *a map of cabin sites, spiritual sites, cultural sites, graves, and other traditional use sites considered historic resources under the Historical Resources Act (if the Indigenous community or group is willing to have these locations disclosed), as well as traditional trails and resource activity patterns.*

However, in response to EID's inquiry to the Aboriginal Consultation Office (ACO) regarding Indigenous Consultation Requirements for the Project's *Water Act* application and this EIA, EID received a File Number for Consultation (FNC) response that "no consultation is required for the *Water Act* approval as applied for under FNC202251256, or for the environmental impact assessment report" (GOA, 2022).

This was followed by an additional inquiry to Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (Alberta EPA):

"Please provide further guidance on the level of Indigenous engagement required, including the need for detailed Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Traditional Land Use studies identified in Section 5, considering the 2022 FNC Decision Letter (attached) has stated that Indigenous Consultation will not be required for the *Water Act* or the Environmental Impact Assessment."

Alberta EPA (2024) responded:

"It is up to the proponent to explain. This is a standard question which appears in other [f]inal Terms of References for proposed projects where Indigenous consultation has been determined it is not required. Having said that, a proponent may also choose to do an Indigenous consultation/engagement program if Indigenous groups have reached out. If that occurred, then the proponent would explain their engagement program."

15.2 INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT AND TEK/TLU STUDIES

Attempts at engagement have not resulted in any response from Siksika Nation, or any other Indigenous group, regarding the Project (see Volume 1, Section 12: Public and Indigenous Engagement). Therefore, the EID has not identified the need to complete TEK and TLU studies. If future engagement with Siksika Nation or any other interested Indigenous group occurs, and they do express interest in a TEK and TLU study, the EID is willing to discuss with Alberta EPA and the interested Nation or group to initiate these studies.

Additional details on engagement efforts are found in the Public and Indigenous Engagement section (Volume 1, Section 12).

15.3 LIMITS TO ACCESS FOR TRADITIONAL USE

The EID encompasses an area of 600,000 ha (1.5 million acres). Land in this area is comprised of cultivated and non-cultivated parcels. The EID owns approximately 243,000 ha (600,000 acres) of this land in the district, with the majority being native prairie grassland. The remaining lands within the administrative boundaries of the EID are privately held by individual or corporate agricultural producers. EID has a Public Access Policy that applies to EID owned and leased lands and is also applicable for reservoirs and the surrounding areas under their jurisdiction via *Water Act* License (EID, 2024a). Access is not permitted on other privately-held lands in the district without permission of the owner. Public access is generally permitted on most EID owned lands designated as community pastures. The EID lands under private lease require separate permission from the leaseholder for access. The EID requires certain directions to be followed by members of the public and Indigenous Peoples while on lands owned and leased by the EID, including requesting permission from lease holders before gaining access and restricting vehicle traffic to road allowances and existing trails (EID, 2024b).

Reservoirs are generally open to public access, and this includes the extant SLR. Access to SLR will not be affected during the construction of the Project, except for some temporary access restrictions, as required to protect public safety during construction activities. Once completed, the expanded reservoir would be publicly accessible, and therefore improve access as compared to the current land use in the Project area.

An exception to private land within the footprint is the publicly accessible, partly developed, Range Road 165 road allowance. During the planned construction for the Project, this right-of-way will be closed, and control will transfer to the EID since it will be underwater and no longer useful. The EID is working with the County of Newell to close the Road Allowance, which also requires Government of Alberta approval. Once closed, the land will become County of Newell land and they intend to lease this to the EID. While closure of the road allowance will result in a loss of public access to the Project area during construction, once the reservoir is operational the lands and water of the expanded reservoir and embankments will be publicly accessible, per EID's access policy, and these areas could be accessed by the public for recreational uses, or by Indigenous People for traditional and recreational purposes. These uses will include all public and TU activities that are currently permitted on other publicly accessible EID lands including fishing but excluding public hunting and trapping.

15.4 EFFECTS OF THE PROJECT ON TRADITIONAL LAND USE

Project effects on access to TLU lands are addressed in Land Use and Management (see Volume 2, Section 13.7.3). Effects on plants are discussed in Vegetation and Wetlands assessment (Volume 2, Section 10). For TU Wildlife species, refer to the Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat assessment (Volume 2, Section 11). There are no known and publicly available previously

documented TU areas and spiritual sites within lands affected by the Project (GOA, 2024). Changes to TU of lands and resources are expected to include:

- loss of access to the extant road allowance during construction and once the expanded reservoir basin is filled;
- reduced abundance and distribution of plants that may have been used traditionally as a result of clearing soil;
- change in plant community/distribution resulting from habitat change around the perimeter of the new reservoir;
- increased ability to view wildlife in the expanded reservoir area, especially waterfowl and other semi-aquatic species; and
- increased fishing opportunities based on expanded reservoir volume.

There will be no change to hunting, as the lands are currently not available for hunting, and this will not change once the reservoir expansion is complete.

15.5 PLANTS, WILDLIFE, AND FISH

Indigenous Peoples have historically used native plants for medicines, dyes, food, crafts/construction, and for various ceremonial or spiritual uses. A literature review identified several plant species in the Dry Mixedgrass Subregion that may have been used traditionally by the Blackfoot Confederacy and Siksika Nation (Jonnstun, 1970; Galileo Education Network, 2016; Stantec Environmental Consulting Ltd., 2018). Within the TLSA (see Figure 15-1), 48 potential TU plant species were identified, including those used for foods, ceremonial purposes, medicine, clothing, or crafts (see Vegetation and Wetlands: Volume 2, Section 10.3.3; Table 10-11; and Appendix H7). This analysis only identifies if species were present and does not describe their quality or intensity of use. Those TU plants identified in the Project area will be removed during topsoil stripping for the Project, however, these same species are known to occur throughout the Dry Mixedgrass Natural Subregion on native grassland habitats.

Indigenous Peoples of the Canadian Prairies harvested wildlife for food (e.g., ungulates, grouse), fur or bones (e.g., weasels, canids, large rodents, rabbits), and for feathers (e.g., hawks and eagles). For example, species such as Porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*) and White-tailed Jackrabbits (*Lepus townsendii*) are used in ceremonial clothing and regalia by some Indigenous groups.

Based on limited, publicly-available data, TU wildlife species that may be found in the Project area and surrounding study areas are described in Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat section (see Volume 2, Section 11.4.5, Table 11-16). Most wildlife species used traditionally are listed as “Secure” indicating high abundance, however several, including the Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), Badger (*Taxidea taxus*), Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*), American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) are listed as sensitive (GOA, 2020). Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*), Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) are listed as species of special concern or at risk (i.e., Threatened or Endangered) either provincially and/or federally (Government of Canada [GOC], 2024). The subset of species (listed or otherwise) observed in the Project area are known

to occur in the surrounding region, indicating that no critical or unique habitat exists for TU species within the Project area.

Fish have traditional and cultural importance to many Indigenous Peoples. In the southern Alberta region, fish were used mainly for sustenance. Specific TU fish species have not been identified (see Aquatic Ecology: Volume 2, Section 8), but it is likely that large sportfish species like Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*) and Lake Whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*), which occur in the extant reservoir, are preferred as they contain the most meat for consumption.

It is important to note that most of the Project area has not been accessible for TU since settlement and the signing of Treaty 7, except for access along a public road allowance. For further information, refer to Volume 2, Section 13 (Land Use and Management), and Section 15.6 below.

15.6 ACCESS FOR TRADITIONAL USE

Descriptions of Baseline and Project Case TU access can be found in Land Use and Management (see Volume 2, Sections 13.5.7 and 13.6.10). At present, access to the Project area is limited by private ownership and the EID's Public Access Policy, with the exception of the Range Road 165 road allowance, which is publicly accessible to all (EID, 2024a). The road allowance will be closed and the land leased to the EID prior to construction so that it can be excavated and flooded. The resulting reservoir and berms will be accessible in the same capacity as the current SLR (Volume 2, Section 13.5.7, and 13.6.10).

15.7 INCIDENTAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS OF RECENT AND HISTORIC SITE USES

As stated in the *Historical Resources Act* (HRA) (GOA, 2000) Approval with Conditions (HRA Number: 4825-21-0010-003, January 24, 2025) received for the Project:

"There are no Historical Resources Act requirements associated with Indigenous traditional use sites of a historic resource nature; however, the proponent must comply with Standard Requirements under the Historical Resources Act: reporting the discovery of historic resources, which are applicable to all land surface disturbance activities in the Province of Alberta."

During Baseline field investigations for several programs, including wildlife, soils, vegetation, and historic resources, field personnel remained vigilant in looking for any evidence of recent land uses, such as evidence of firepits (charcoal, rock rings) or temporary camping sites (e.g., trash or debris, wood poles) or other rocks occurring in patterns that may have been related to recent cultural use of the site. However, as the site was private land, recently used for cattle grazing, oil and gas production, and supporting canal infrastructure, it was considered unlikely that any evidence would be found and indeed, no incidental observations of recent site use were identified.

A targeted archaeological assessment consisting of shovel tests and pedestrian surveys, resulted in the discovery of 22 archaeological sites, further described in Volume 2, Section 14 (Historic Resources).

15.8 INCORPORATION OF TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE / TRADITIONAL LAND USE IN THE PROJECT

As stated above, a TU study was not required, as per the ACO and subsequent clarification from Alberta EPA. No publicly available, site-specific information regarding TEK and TLU within or near the Project area was found during review of publicly available literature.

15.9 MITIGATION MEASURES AND RESIDUAL IMPACTS

The Vegetation and Wetlands section (Volume 2, Section 10) provides a residual impacts assessment for Project effects on TU plant species (see Section 10.6). As areas with undisturbed grasslands in the TLSA surrounding the Project footprint and in the TRSA will continue to maintain TU plant species, residual effects are assessed as Neutral. However, there will still be benefits to this resource if restored grassland areas can recruit TU plants from the natural seed bank, by dispersal from surrounding areas, or through measures to assist recruitment. In addition, a plan to encourage the recruitment and growth of TU plant species in the reclaimed grassland and wetland areas, and to enhance the recovery or changes to TU wildlife species could be included as a future program.

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat (Volume 2, Section 11) did not assess residual effects on TU wildlife species as this resource was scoped as being applicable only for Baseline description. However, it is expected that habitat for TU wildlife species will increase for species that occur in open water habitat and water boundary habitats and decrease for species that occur in native prairie habitat. Thus, any mitigation measures that promote grassland species recovery may provide benefits for this resource.

Aquatic Resources did not include TU fish species as a resource for assessment (see Volume 2, Section 8). A short Baseline review of TU of fish was discussed, concluding that due to lack of published information on this subject, an assessment of TU on fish species could not be completed. As it is uncertain which species of fish may be considered TU, measures to increase fish habitat and productivity may or may not benefit this resource. No additional mitigation was warranted.

Access to TU sites as a resource for assessment was examined in the Land Use and Management section (see Volume 2, Sections 13.5.7 and 13.6.10). The residual impact on this resource was assessed as High Positive, as the site will increase from no current access to full access, and this will continue for the long-term as the reservoir will be a permanent feature. The EID could also:

- identify alternatives to enhance fish habitat;
- install or upgrade the existing boat launch to facilitate access to the reservoir; and
- additional enhancements to improve access to the site could include a designated parking area, a trail to the water edge, and a sign to welcome guests to the site.

However, these enhancements are not part of this Project.

To ensure access during and after construction of the reservoir, the following measures are suggested to facilitate and communicate access opportunities for TLU:

- communication with Siksika Nation or other Indigenous communities that show interest in the Project, through construction and operation;
- on-site signage explaining access to the road allowance (only during construction) and the extant reservoir's boat launch; and
- up-to-date Project information posted on the EID's website.

15.10 CONCLUSION

The effect of the Project on the TU resources as presented in other sections of the EIA ranges from Neutral to High Positive. Wildlife and fish resources were not assessed. Various mitigations and enhancements may lead to increases in TU plants and wildlife and may further promote access for Indigenous Peoples to use the site.

15.11 REFERENCES

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See Volume 2, Section 15 for Figure 15-1