

Early investigation suggests southern Alberta bird deaths ‘unique’

Retired scientist says it’s normal to have lots of ducks in the area

BY COLETTE DERWORIZ, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 10, 2014 3:00 PM

The preliminary investigation into the dead ducks found under a transmission line in southern Alberta suggests it’s a “unique situation” due to a high number of birds spending time in the area this winter, says the head of AltaLink.

Earlier this week, retired scientist David McIntyre reported discovering dozens of dead ducks along the line north of Pincher Creek and south of the Oldman River valley.

Officials with AltaLink, which operates the line, sent a team of experts down to the area on Wednesday and started an investigation.

“This particular incident looks like a pretty unique situation,” Dennis Frehlich, the company’s interim president and chief executive, said Friday when asked for an update during an event at AltaLink. “There’s a higher volume of birds that are overwintering down in the Pincher Creek area due to feed in the farmer’s fields. The flight path looks like it’s between those fields and the Oldman River dam.”

McIntyre, who lives in the area, said that isn’t unique.

“The ducks are there all of the time. They will stay there as long as there is open water and they are on the open river,” he said. “Ninety per cent of the waterfowl are below the dam so this is on the open Oldman River.

“There are dense concentrations of ducks, maybe 1,000-plus ducks.”

He’s also concerned about other birds — including golden eagles — as other lines get built in the area.

“We have the existing line that is virtually a proven killer of waterfowl,” said McIntyre, noting there’s an east-west line currently being built and another planned one for the future. “So the writing is on the wall.”

AltaLink, which noted the investigation is ongoing, said they know enough to determine they need to add more mitigation measures on the current line and will reassess whether they to install deflectors on any future lines as well.

“You look at the region, you do the best assessment on where you should apply the mitigation,” said Frehlich, noting they map the high-risk areas and install mitigation measures, which are 50 to 75 per cent effective, on a priority basis.

“The bottom line is we have infrastructure. It’s overhead power lines, it’s needed to supply people in the province and we recognize birds collide potentially with those,” he said. “We have 12,000 kilometres of line across the province and we can’t mitigate everywhere.

“We’ve got a responsibility from a cost-effectiveness perspective.”

Frehlich’s update on the investigation came Friday after a presentation by the Canadian Electricity Association declaring AltaLink a Sustainable Electricity Company — the first transmission company to receive such a designation for its fiscal, social and environmental practices.

This week’s incident, he said, won’t affect the designation but does highlight their processes and practices as a company, which included responding to the bird deaths in Pincher Creek.