

AltaLink transmission line construction leaves biologist frustrated



By [Kevin Rushworth](#), High River Times
Friday, April 18, 2014 5:05:09 MDT PM

MULTIMEDIA EDITOR

Though construction of AltaLink's newest transmission line—running from south of Fort Macleod and passing Frank Lake's western shore—has left one area biologist frustrated with the company's environmental practices, company representatives stressed they are well within protocols.

Greg Wagner, senior wildlife biologist with Athene Environmental, contacted the High River Times on April 4. He had witnessed heavy track vehicles tearing up the ground along the alignment.

"They've gone in during wet conditions and tore the ground up, which is bad environmental practice and should be done under frozen or dry conditions," he explained.

The rutting and tracking was caused when crews were anchoring the towers for transmission line 1037L-1038L built immediately west of Frank Lake, an internationally recognized birding destination.

"They went in and they brought track vehicles in there and they've torn it up," he said. "It's ugly; it's got to be reclaimed."

Wagner said vegetation mats, designed to protect the ground from sustaining damage, weren't initially used during the process and that he was told AltaLink was operating within protocol.

"I'm sorry, but it's not acceptable to do that in wildlife habitat," he said. "You've got agricultural land and places all over you could do this and get away with it."

Wagner said crews returned and laid vegetation mats, but he said the damage to the ground had already been done. With rutting and tracking comes the spread of invasive species, Wagner said.

"How much weed invasion are you going to get in there?" he asked. "Are they going to monitor? Are they going to replant? What are they going to do?"

As well, transmission lines can have adverse affects on the bird population, Wagner added. Frank Lake is a major staging area for trumpeter swans and having birds fly into the wires remains a concern.

"We know that these lines can be very hard on large birds with heavy wing loadings like swans, cranes and Canada geese," he said. "They don't have much manoeuvrability."

Wagner said he's been told deflectors will be added to the lines. However, the idea of transmission lines, even those constructed under protocol, through Frank Lake doesn't sit well with Wagner.

"Within the MD of Foothills, you only have one internationally significant wetland for birds and this is it, so why do you even have one new transmission line coming in?" he asked.

Peter Brodsky, manager of external communications at AltaLink, wasn't able to comment on whether crews could have begun work earlier. Construction, he said, begins when scheduling allows it to.

"We do take environmental conditions into consideration when we're planning our project, but we have time lines to meet when we're building major transmission projects," he said.

While the land could sustain vehicle traffic when the project began, Brodsky said the ground defrosted over a short period. He said vegetation mats were laid on April 7, following a further melt.

"When Mr. Wagner brought (his concerns) to our attention, we did our assessment and we determined that we were well within our tolerances for the disturbance of the soils in the area," he added.

Though vehicles created rutting along the alignment, Brodsky said the tracking would be corrected. He said crews followed AltaLink's strict environmental protocols.

Upon completion of a transmission line, he noted AltaLink continues to monitor the construction site. After a full year of operation, a full reclamation project begins, Brodsky said.

"You have to respect that over the course of the project and afterwards, we are committed to and we will follow through on returning the land to as close to original state as possible," he said.

After the concern was raised, landowners Ducks Unlimited visited the site and Brodsky said no major concerns were raised. He said they're aware of the state of the land and of their reclamation protocols.

In respect to the transfer of weed species, Brodsky said employees and contractors are expected to keep the condition of the trucks in such a way to minimize the spread of invasive species.

"If there's any concerns about invasive species, we will of course take (necessary) steps, whether it's herbicide or other measures necessary to remove non-resident weeds," he said.

During a transmission line's planning stage, Brodsky said an environmental impact study is conducted and it includes representatives from AltaLink's Avian Protection Program.

"In cases where large bird populations are part of the equation, we install bird diverters and other methods to make sure the lines are visible to birds who are in a migratory pattern over the area," he said.