



Detail of *Keep your hands off my fracking (Alberta) water*, by artist Steve Mills.

Artist Donates Work to Raise Awareness about Fracking Water Withdrawals

by Jan Malek

Steve Mills has been an artist for as long as he can remember.

His grandmother taught him how to paint and how to express himself through art. His work tends to focus on the land and water. He hunts and fishes, so his thoughts are about preserving the resources for future generations.

“All of my reference is to the land – the land is important; water is important,” explains Mills. “Hunting and fishing is a universal cultural activity. Basically,

we are all products of successful hunters and fishers. My artwork is based on that. I live my paintings.”

It was his concern for water that led him to do a piece of art he calls “*Keep your hands off my (fracking) Alberta water.*” The limited edition print is based on a larger work he’s done – a huge 40” by 60” acrylic painting depicting the clean river water he likes to fly-fish in. He has been fly-fishing for more than 50 years and knows many local waterways intimately.

For the artwork, he printed the painting twice and then added a drill hole using felt pens and a more contemporary style to show how water is being robbed from its natural source.

He has seen the theft first-hand.

While fishing the eastern slopes in Alberta last summer he noticed pumps had been placed in the Kakwa River, one of his favourite fishing spots, with kilometres of lines to carry the water away.



Steve Mills has been fly-fishing for more than 50 years and has seen major changes in local rivers. He is concerned with projects that drain Alberta's waterways.

"Last year was a drought and this year is even worse. I've fished that long enough – I don't know much about fracking, but I do know about fishing. It was not a good time to be taking water out."

Hydraulic fracturing – or "fracking" as it is more commonly known – is an extreme form of energy extraction. The technique uses and contaminates millions of litres of water by mixing it with thousands of litres of unidentified chemicals underground at very high pressure in order to create fractures in the underlying shale rock formations and extract the natural gas below the surface. Fracking for unconventional gas is rapidly expanding in almost every province across Canada and fracking companies are rapidly draining water sources for their projects.

Mills doesn't know the name of the particular company that was taking the water for fracking, and he hasn't been able to get much information from the government. He contacted the former Alberta government last summer. "They told me it was fine and talked to me like I was an idiot," he said.

He has written to the new Notley government and sent in all of the information he has gathered, but at the time of publication he still had not heard back from anyone.

"They have endangered bull trout there – lowering the water lowers the ox-

xygen levels and raises the temperature. Last summer it got worse and worse. They pumped water for six weeks," added Mills.

"[The government] is just allowing millions and millions of gallons to be taken out of the rivers in the worst possible conditions every summer. Right now everything is dead," he added. "I've fly-fished for 50 some-odd years and I'm good at it. The last trip we took some temperature readings of the water and it was 22 degrees. We didn't see a single fish move – and with those water temperatures, they are dead."

He also tried calling the federal government's environmental department, but was told the water pumping did not fall under federal jurisdiction.

"It's ironic because there are signs posted warning fishermen that if we kill – even accidentally – the bull trout we will get a \$100,000 fine. But the [provincial] government is rubber stamping the destruction of the entire environment. It's allowing something that is killing all of the fish."

He admits that the runaround is getting tiresome. "It's very frustrating. I feel like no one is listening," he said. "I'm out there all the time and I see what is happening to the rivers. They are disappearing, but when I call the govern-

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Mills vows to keep working for government action, but in the meantime he would like his art to help raise awareness. He has generously donated a limited edition of 10 original prints of his artwork to the Council of Canadians.

When asked why he picked the Council of Canadians for his donation he said he likes how the organization looks at "the whole picture."

"The Council looks at water issues and protecting water and seems to have an overall approach to it – it's visionary. It just seemed like a logical, thoughtful group of people that want to make things better now and for the future."

As for the fracking, he would like to see some kind of compromise that doesn't put clean water sources at risk.

"I think there are creative solutions so that both jobs and the environment can exist," he said. "Alberta is full of stinking swamps, why not take water from there? There are so few clear rivers here – they should just be left alone."

The Council of Canadians sincerely thanks Steve Mills for his generous donation. To view more of his artwork please visit his website at www.stevemills.gallery.