

Opinion: Why Site C must be stopped

Alluvial soil to be flooded could produce vegetables for a million people

BY WENDY HOLM, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN JULY 28, 2014



An artist's rendering shows BC Hydro's proposed Site C dam.

The power mavens have already pronounced its energy too costly to warrant construction. You'd think that would be the end of it. But no. BC Hydro and its masters in Victoria remain doggedly committed to the construction of the Site C Dam to power the export of Canadian energy.

A recent BC Hydro poll suggests British Columbians are split on the issue. More correctly, British Columbians are in the dark when it comes to the public policy implications of Site C.

It's time to start using the F-word. The F word is food.

The east-west-running Peace River valley with its deep alluvial soils particularly suited to vegetable production has the only Class 1 climate north of Prince George. Because of this, it can produce almost all the crops grown in the Fraser Valley with higher productivity (yields) due to its longer daylight.

B.C. is food-deficient in vegetables; we currently supply only 43 per cent of the B.C. market for fresh vegetables that can be grown in this province.

The alluvial soils to be flooded to produce overpriced power for the Site C dam are capable of producing sufficient fresh vegetables to provide the nutritional needs of a million people. Forever.

CBC's The Current recently ran a series on the link between poverty and health. Seems poverty is a whopping 50 per cent determinant of health outcomes; the quality of medical care is a mere 25 per cent. An important part of the reason is nutrition: when families don't have enough income to put nutrition on the table, health suffers. And the most important years are childhood.

Already, people in the northern regions of our province pay four times what the rest of us do for their food supply. Already, B.C. has the highest rate of child poverty in Canada. Only fruits and vegetables are fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are the irreplaceable building blocks of nutrition. The Peace River Valley is the only area for large-scale vegetable expansion in the province.

With climate change, increasing transportation costs, higher energy costs, conflicts over water use in many food supply areas (such as California) and food contamination outbreaks, the cost of imported vegetables has nowhere to go but up. In the past 12 months alone, the prices of fresh vegetables to Canadian consumers spiked by 9.4 per cent (StatsCan).

Yet, in the face of overwhelming evidence, the B.C. government and its private sector partners seem quite content to throw tomorrow under the bus and press ahead with the construction of Site C — economics and the public interest be damned.

Why? In part, because voter ignorance concerning the implications of Site C keeps it politically safe: split voters have zero clout. In part, it's about money: there are lots of significant piggies 'round the taxpayer trough that will make big bucks building it. In part, it's about leverage: saddled with Site C's high-priced power, BC Hydro will hemorrhage red ink, fuelling calls for its privatization and, as such, delivering the vision of investors.

And, in part, it may also be about the water itself. Once impounded behind the dam, the previously free-flowing water of B.C.'s Peace River becomes a NAFTA commodity if BC Hydro is privatized and American investors are involved. A vast shale formation was just discovered in northeastern B.C. that is dependent on fracking for extraction. While some suggest the Williston Reservoir and stream flow at Taylor provide sufficient water for this purpose, others suggest this bears closer examination. I agree. Also interestingly, Site C Dam is smack where it belongs to support the Kuiper, NAWAPA and Grand Prairie schemes for continental water sharing. As water becomes increasingly scarce, the ridiculous becomes profitable.

This deliberate destruction of resources belonging to tomorrow to fill the pockets of investors today is obscene. Natural capital laid down over millennia is not for the present to withdraw — we are meant to live off its interest (crops) and reinvest good stewardship practices to grow this legacy for the future.

It's time to put an end to this.

With the business community, public policy, food and environmental professionals all standing together in opposition to Site C, this should be the point in the public process where Christy Clark gets to stand

up and say: “Okay, you know what? When we see all of you lined up on the same side of an issue, we know it’s time to cut our losses and move on. Site C is dead.”

It’s a big government that admits its mistakes, and voters will reward them for it.

If they don’t, it’s perhaps time for an injunction.

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