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## Site C dam review: not yes, not no...

Patrick Brown

The federal-provincial Joint Review Panel environmental report on BC Hydro's proposed hydroelectric dam at 'Site C' on the Peace River failed to draw any firm conclusion about whether it should be built or not. Instead, it referred the decision right back to the BC and federal cabinets, with recommendations that most of the economic and electrical demand calculations should be reviewed by the BC Utilities Commission. (The proposal had been specifically exempted from BCUC review by earlier BCLiberal government legislation.)

### Environmental Damage

The Joint Review Panel (JRP) report noted that the dam would do significant damage to fisheries potential, wildlife habitat, and agricultural lands. This damage would affect both First Nations peoples and settlers on the Peace River Valley, and it could not be mitigated. The report also described the panel's concern about the changes to the entire Peace River region from the cumulative effects of the dam, oil and gas development, forestry, mining, and energy production.

### Counting the Benefits?

The panel expressed considerable uncertainty when it came to the benefits of building the dam, particularly about virtually all the figures presented by BC Hydro. Project costs, currently estimated at \$7.9 billion, were questioned. Electricity demand figures were doubtful. Future energy prices (particularly for the LNG industry) were unreliable. All of these should be reviewed by BCUC before construction begins, said the panel.

### How About Alternatives?

The dam, concluded the panel, would (on the basis of the figures supplied by BC Hydro) produce electricity cheaper than any other clean and green alternative. But the panel reserved its strongest criticism for Hydro's failure to properly evaluate alternatives. Noting that the dam, when built, would result in significant financial losses for an already cash-strapped public utility, the panel questioned the potential for further Demand Side Management (user conservation); the exploitation of 'geographically diverse renewable resources'; the 'optimal integration of intermittent and firm resources', and 'climate-induced changes to hydrology'.

### No Conclusion

Finally, noted the panel, the government needed to 'update its guidance' on the 'social discount rate'. All of this clearly meant that the panel did not trust BC Hydro's calculations, either on the dam or on any alternatives.

Thus the panel's conclusion: 'Proponent has not fully demonstrated the need for the Project on the timetable set forth'. Combine that with the certainty of environmental damage, and one can see why no firm conclusion emerges.

### Interpretation Varies

This equivocal result enabled supporters and opponents of the dam to register a variety of initial comments. BC Energy Minister Bill Bennett's interpretation was full speed ahead: 'We are pretty darn sure we are going to need [the electricity] ten years from now.'

BC Hydro's spokesperson David Conway explained the figures: 'It's not an exact science. You can't forecast this on the head of a pin.'

Provincial NDP leader John Horgan described the BCLiberals' approach as, 'We have a government proposing to spend \$8 billion on power that we may not need at a time that we don't have the money to spend.'

Green Party MLA Andrew Weaver followed up the panel's report with his own take on alternatives that would involve geothermal, wind, tidal, and small-scale hydro generation, distributed throughout the province and coupled with existing dams. This approach, he said, would yield substantial economic benefit to communities, especially First Nations.

He also noted that, if Site C were built, BC Hydro would incur substantial financial losses for several years, 'accentuating the intergenerational pay-now, benefit-later effect'. He emphasized potential power savings from energy conservation. The result, he noted, would be energy supply that more closely follows demand. ✍

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