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Limited comment for Toba River hydro scheme

~ Patrick Brown

Despite an environmental review period that could stretch as long as 180 days, public comment on two run-of-river hydroelectricity generation proposals near the head of Toba Inlet is to be limited to one month. The comment period, which runs from February 1 to March 2, 2006, has been set by the BC Environmental Assessment Office (EAO). The EAO says it is designed to 'document specific public issues'. The proponent, Plutonic Power Corporation, has already held public meetings at Sechelt, Powell River, and on Cortes Island.

Plutonic is an entrepreneurial company with no track record so far as an Independent Power Producer (IPP). Its proposals are designed to answer BC Hydro's request for 'Green Power' generation schemes.

Plutonic made its application to the EAO in mid-January, but has not yet submitted an Archaeology Impact Assessment. The application is for approval under both federal and provincial environmental regulations.

In order for the projects to go ahead, Plutonic must obtain approval from the EAO, negotiate a contract with BC Hydro, raise financing for construction, and reach agreement with First Nations in the affected area. It is not clear whether approval from the BC Utilities Commission is required. Plutonic estimates that the generating plants could be put into service in two to three years after the go-ahead is given.

Plutonic's Plans

Plutonic's Toba Inlet proposal is a part of a billion-dollar plan to develop a series of run-of-river generating stations linked by powerlines, and feeding into the main BC Transmission Corporation system. The overall plan anticipates the development of two sites in the Toba River area, followed by nine in the Bute Inlet area, and one in the upper Lilloet Valley.

The two sites for which EAO application has been made are on Montrose Creek (50Mw) and the East Toba River (118Mw), about 25 - 33km northeast of the head of Toba Inlet. Toba Inlet itself cuts deep into the BC mainland, just north of Desolation Sound and directly northeast of Campbell River. The sites would be linked by a 150km, 230Kva overhead powerline to a new substation at Saltery Bay, south of Powell River. The East Toba/Montrose Creek project is estimated to cost some \$300 million, and to supply sufficient power for some 65,000 homes.

Montrose Creek or 'Headwall Canyon'?

Much of the Toba River valley has been extensively logged over the past fifty years, and the valley itself is served by existing Forest Service Roads. However, the site on Montrose Creek is some distance up the Filer River, a tributary of the Toba, in

what is described by members of the Klahoose First Nation as one of the last pristine valleys in the southern coast. There is at present no road up to the proposed Montrose site.

A more romantic view of the Montrose Creek area comes from the New York based eco-tourism enterprise Earth River, which has partnered with some Klahoose band members to run ten-day 'expeditions' into the valley, advertised as 'Headwall Canyon':

'With its sheer 6,000 foot, glacier-cut, ice capped granite walls, over a dozen magnificent, easy to hike to waterfalls of Yosemite-like proportions and massive old growth trees, Headwall Canyon in southwestern British Columbia is a master work of nature's artistry. There are few places on earth where one can see so much spectacular scenery in such a relatively small area. This is what Yosemite must have looked like long before the roads and concession stands. Named by Earth River on the first descent, this magical land lay virtually undiscovered until 1999. Dropped in by helicopter to the top of this magnificent wonderland, we will begin our 7-day journey, camping on white sand beaches and hiking to the base of some of the planet's most impressive, rarely seen waterfalls. As guests of members of the Klahoose First Nation, we will share native American food and customs and learn first hand of their struggle to protect this magnificent sanctuary from the ravages of clear cut logging.'

Robert Kennedy Jr is quoted in their promotional material: 'This is really one of the jewels of the planet. I think anyone who comes here is going to put this on their top 3 list of most beautiful places on earth.'

Earth River charges some \$3,000 per person for the trip; two such expeditions are scheduled each July.

Supporters and Opponents

The Klahoose are one of the four bands whose claimed territory is affected by the Plutonic proposal; the others are the Hamatla Treaty Society, the Homalco, and the Sliammon. So far, little has been heard from the other three bands.

Not all members of the Klahoose First Nation are happy with the band's opposition to the Plutonic proposal. Band member Ken Brown, in a letter to the EAO, said that he had been told by Earth River that 'they would be hiring celebrities from America to raise awareness to the area and help stop the project.' Brown charged that this was 'pandering to the self interest of a few band members and elitist americans . . . If you have ever visited our community you would see first hand the

levels of high unemployment and poverty.'

But there are other opponents of the scheme. Alan Rebane of Pacific Mountain Outfitters Ltd is the guide outfitter in the Toba Inlet area. He writes: 'This project would cut directly through the major part of my guide territory. It would be very disruptive to our hunting activities and it would also severely impact my adventure tourism in the area.'

Sedley and Trude Sweeney of Whaletown attended the Cortes Island meeting. They support the Klahoose: 'The suggestion by Plutonic that the project will have little or no impact on fish, vegetation, bird or wildlife habitat and low visual impact is ridiculous. The roads, bridges, culverts, campbuildings, traffic and increased population in the area are bound to have a serious impact on the whole area. The suggested benefits to logging companies, trucking companies, water taxis, barges, tugboats, helicopter companies, hospitality companies, restaurants and hotels hardly signify the preservation of the pristine beauty of the valleys, nor would they enhance the Klahoose way of life.'

Commentary

It looks as if another classic battle has just begun. Plutonic, a small, entrepreneurial company, has been encouraged by the possibility of long-term generation contracts with BC Hydro to prospect for 'green power' in the wilderness areas of BC. The company has no operating revenue and is financed by the sale of shares, some 12.7 million so far, representing cash raised of some \$4 million. The Toronto Venture Exchange currently lists Plutonic's shares in the 95¢ range.

With a full set of approvals and a long-term contract with BC Hydro to purchase the electricity, Plutonic might well be

able to raise the large amount of capital which they would need to carry out their scheme. But this money, whether raised on the market or borrowed, could come at a high price. It's a sort of heavily disguised public-private partnership (P3), with Plutonic required to finance all the front-end development and deal with all the environmental and political problems.

Meanwhile environmentalists, First Nations, ecotourism operators and others take up the fight to protect relatively untouched areas of the province. First Nations once again assert their not-yet-settled land claims. Within First Nations, conflict is re-ignited between the haves and the have-nots. And over it all, several BC government departments are kept busy with water licenses, crown land grants, and a complex set of regulations, approvals, and permits, but don't actually have to take responsibility for solving any of the real problems. Legislation which is supposed to protect the environment is used to permit activities that damage the environment, providing that those activities meet the purposes of the government.

All this may be characterized as activity that contributes to a healthy BC economy; \$300 million spent in the Toba River valley is bound to make a difference, both to the economy and the environment. But one wonders whether a better energy supply and environmental planning process would produce more benefit for the money spent, not to mention the efforts of both BC Hydro and the provincial government. One also wonders whether greater attention to the claims and to the needs of First Nations would reduce the risks of such schemes for entrepreneurs and to the environment. ☞

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