



West Kootenay EcoSociety

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The Debate Over Energy Development In BC

By Lee-Ann Unger

We must take radical steps to combat climate change. Climate science tells us that we must take dramatic leaps to shift away from the use of fossil fuels, which cause harmful greenhouse gas (ghg) emissions, and we must do so quickly if we are to have any chance of stabilizing the climate and minimizing catastrophic impacts on human civilization as we know it. Renewable energy technologies, including wind, solar, tidal and run of river, when done responsibly can all play an important role in this shift. These technologies, accompanied by aggressive energy conservation measures, efficiency upgrades, and ecosystem conservation and restoration, could help to reduce ghg emissions and mitigate the catastrophic impacts of runaway climate change.

The Liberal government's push to use the private sector to advance renewable energy projects in BC has generated controversy and resulted in a challenging division amongst groups and individuals, especially regarding private run-of-river hydro projects.

The rush to develop private run-of-river hydro projects has led to hundreds of private water/power license applications for rivers and creeks within BC. It is this haphazard approach that has drawn considerable opposition and it isn't hard to see why. Opponents criticize the lack of planning, poor regulations, including the lack of a proper environmental assessment process, and the lack of monitoring and enforcement. In fact, the BC government's current approach has led to some projects being planned in sensitive ecosystems with unacceptable impacts on the environment. Locally, Glacier and Howser Creeks have been named the third most endangered in BC by the Outdoor Recreation Council of BC as a result of an ecologically irresponsible private power project proposal.

In addition to environmental concerns, many challenge the Liberal government's push for private ownership of our energy resources. There is good reason to do so. Questions have been raised as to how further privatization of our electricity system will impact BC's long-term energy security and its ability to shift to a more decentralized electricity generation system in the future. Other important considerations are potential problems related to the continued deregulation of the electricity sector; and the potential NAFTA implications.

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Proponents of the government's shift in energy production, including some climate scientists and environmentalists, state that the opposition to private power projects is shortsighted. They assert that the push for private power projects is key to reducing ghg emissions from fossil fuel consumption; that it doesn't matter how it is done or who does it – but that independent power projects (IPPs) must be done. In a recent Vancouver Sun opinion editorial, Andrew Weaver, a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change wrote about this and emphasized the need for entirely emissions-free energy: “We need staggering amounts of energy conservation, emissions cuts and renewable energy. And all need to be deployed at an unprecedented rate.”

I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Weaver that these actions are critical. However, we need to be thoughtful in how we act and ensure that we do not compromise ecosystems in the process, as they have vital importance beyond energy production. Intact ecosystems are critical to maintaining biodiversity. They also improve humanity's resilience and ability to combat climate change. We must ensure that the development of renewable energy doesn't compromise the resilience of our ecosystems. The solutions we deploy must be true solutions and not simply create more problems. As David Suzuki wrote in a recent article, “Panic shouldn't guide policy.”

Much can be done to improve the government's current approach to renewable energy generation in BC. In fact, their current plan leaves much to be desired.

A comprehensive plan for renewable energy generation is an essential step in this process. Mapping of areas that have high energy potential and would result in minimal impact on the environment is a key piece of such a plan. It must also include aggressive conservation measures to increase the efficiency of our existing energy infrastructure.

In addition to a plan we need to ensure that we have a meaningful environmental assessment process in place. Under the current system, projects less than 50 megawatts do not undergo an environmental assessment. For projects greater than 50 megawatts, the process lacks the teeth to properly assess and then reject projects with significant environmental impacts. The process also fails to assess the cumulative impacts of many power projects within an area.

In 2002, the Ministry of Environment staff and budget was cut by nearly one-third. This drastically reduces the ability of the ministry to respond meaningfully to the swell of project proposals they receive, to assess them, and to ensure proper monitoring and enforcement.

It is also critical that we develop a new system for water licenses and crown land tenure that puts a stop to the current gold-rush mentality with which private companies are staking claim to hundreds of rivers and creeks in BC.

Given the situation we are facing with climate change, renewable energy must be a priority. But it must be done in an ecologically responsible way, accompanied with a plan for energy conservation and efficiency gains, as well as a strategy which guarantees that new renewable energy will replace greenhouse gas intensive energy generation. We simply cannot afford to create further environmental problems

BC has a wonderful opportunity to lead the way with cleaner energy generating technologies but is wasting this opportunity through poor policy directives and a lack of responsible planning. Our rivers are one of our greatest resources, are critical to ecosystem health, and will become increasingly important over time as climate change continues to take effect.

To quote Dr. David Suzuki, "We need to ensure that our solutions don't lead to the destruction of the very thing we're trying to protect."