Threat: Private Hydropower

Wild places like Bute Inlet and Glacier/Howser Creeks are not only scenic areas, they are just a few of the hundreds of rivers and creeks that have become flash points over the last three years in the battle that is raging over private hydropower projects in BC. From the Kootenays to the Sunshine Coast, over 800 of British Columbia’s water bodies have been staked by corporations which now include large multinational players such as General Electric.

People may wonder how this gold rush for our public wealth began. The trigger was the 2002 BC Energy Plan, introduced shortly after the BC Liberals were elected, which forbade BC Hydro from competing with the private sector by barring it from producing new sources of electricity. At the same time it directed BC Hydro to meet future projected electricity needs by purchasing energy from private power developers. Since that time there has been a phenomenal 1,140 percent increase in these so-called “independent power project” applications throughout BC.

There are numerous problems with the rush to privatize our creeks and rivers. Currently, 90 percent of private hydropower projects (also known as independent power projects) aren’t required to go through an environmental assessment process. There is no assessment of the cumulative ecological impacts that multiple projects, and the accompanying river diversions, roads, blasting, transmission lines and logging have on the land base. Local governments have been muzzled since the passage of Bill 30 in 2006, which removed the right for them to plan for private power projects; there is no regional or provincial planning process in place. And surprisingly, private power projects are often given exemptions from already low environmental standards due to their status as “minor tenures.”

In British Columbia we have a wonderful opportunity to do green power right. Read more to find out how with proper planning, robust conservation, strong environmental standards, democratic accountability and public ownership we can become world leaders in a green economy.
Two of the most contentious proposed private power projects in BC are the massive 1027 Megawatt Bute Inlet development on the Sunshine Coast and the contentious 100 Megawatt Glacier/Howser project in the Kootenays.

The Bute Inlet proposal, located approximately 150 km north of Powell River is the largest proposed private power project in Canada. Consisting of 16 power houses, over 400 km of transmission lines, 260 km of roads and over 100 bridges the project is situated in prime grizzly bear, mountain goat and salmon habitat. The proposal would see Plutonic Power and General Electric, one of the largest corporations in the world, industrialize a watershed that is renowned for its towering mountains, plentiful wildlife and pristine waters.

Despite its size, the Bute proposal is just one of many projects that are slated for the region. Other power developments in the area, some of which are already built, include: East Toba/Montrose, Upper Toba, Knight Inlet, Toba/Powell Lake/Jervis Inlet, Klinakini River and the Tzoonie watershed. Proceeding with no regional planning, no assessment of cumulative impacts, low environmental standards and power that doesn’t fit BC’s energy needs, the Bute proposal is an example of what has gone wrong with the BC Energy Plan.

The Glacier/Howser project located in the West Kootenays is renowned for the fact that in the summer of 2009 1,100 people turned out in the small town of Kalsko to protest the proposed development. The project, one of over 70 proposed for the Kootenay Columbia region, is especially contentious due to the impact it would have on a unique population of threatened bull trout, grizzlies and mountain caribou habitat. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that water diverted from the streams would never return to the original water bodies. Although the proposal already has an ‘energy purchase agreement’ from BC Hydro, vociferous public opposition coupled with the potential for significant negative environmental impacts could yet see this project derailed.

One of the arguments repeatedly heard from private power proponents and the BC government to justify rapid private hydropower development is that ‘BC is in an energy crisis and is a net importer of electricity’. However, BC Stats, the government’s own statistical agency, shows BC was actually a net exporter of electricity for seven out of the last 11 years. Moreover, these figures exclude the 4,300 GWh of Columbia River Treaty electricity that the BC government currently sells to the United States.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the development of private power in BC is geared towards the export of electricity south of the border. This was confirmed in the August 2009 throne speech when the BC government announced it would strike a task force to examine an “export development policy” for private hydropower.

If we were truly in an energy crisis, why would the BC government be promoting electricity exports?

Private Power – a costly mistake

BC Hydro, and ratepayers, are currently on the hook for $31 billion in ‘energy purchase agreements’ to private power producers. This is of concern for many reasons:

- Run-of-river power typically comes at the wrong time of the year for BC’s energy needs. Most of their intermittent energy comes during the spring melt when BC’s dams are often full, but almost nothing is produced in mid-winter when our consumption is highest. BC Hydro is paying a premium for electricity that doesn’t fit BC’s seasonal energy needs and will likely have to be sold at a loss south of the border.
- BC Hydro, one of our best tools against climate change, now spends more on the 10 percent of electricity that comes from private power producers than it does on the 90 percent of power it generates through its own operations. In addition to the huge price tag, the public is being transitioned from ‘owners’ to ‘renters’ of power production.
- Unlike private companies like General Electric and Plutonic Power, BC Hydro provides substantial dividends to public coffers and provides for long-term electricity planning. It is also able to develop electricity generation projects at a substantially lower costs due to a much higher credit ratings which affords them significantly lower interest rates than private corporations.
Public support for private power in BC is low.

According to a recent poll commissioned by the Wilderness Committee, just 10 percent of British Columbians favour private over public power generation.

Breaking News:

At the time this paper was going to press the BC government announced in its throne speech that it would overrule the BC Utilities Commission — its own independent watchdog — a move widely seen as a move to prop up the fortunes of private power companies, many of which help fund the governing party.

Perhaps more ominously, the government also signaled its intention to export private power.

Grizzly bear habitat in the Kootenays would be negatively impacted by the proposed Glacier/Howser private power project.

Photo: John E. Marriott.

“The question I’m asking is: What is it that’s broke with a system that’s providing cheap, reliable electricity, that’s paying sizeable dividends to the government, that has a rainy day fund and that has money available for new capital projects?... It is basically utility heaven. There isn’t a state in the union that wouldn’t give its eye teeth for a power system like B.C. Hydro. What on earth is it that your government is trying to improve?”**

David Freeman, Energy efficiency pioneer and former Chair of the California Power Authority

Over 1000 people turned out for a rally in Kaslo, BC to save Glacier and Howser creeks from private power development.
Private Power: No solution for climate change

Smart Power: We can get more power out of our existing dams, adding electricity without the additional cost to our ratepayer.

The BC Hydro is already planning on expanding generation at the Revelstoke and Mica dams, and we still have generator slots to fill and power plant upgrades at our heritage hydro facilities.

Powering Down: New air-source heat pumps are three times as efficient as baseboard heating and end-source heat pumps are even more efficient at heating our homes.21 Shift to public transit: Rapid transit and trolley buses are eight times as energy efficient and 30 times as greenhouse gas efficient as private vehicles, helping us save energy and reduce our climate impact at the same time.21

G lobal warming is one of the most serious threats to ever face humanity. Gases produced from the burning of fossil fuels, such as gas, oil and coal, have formed a heat-trapping blanket of carbon in the atmosphere which is increasing the temperature of our planet – to a dangerous level.

The Wilderness Committee is strongly supportive of the development of green energy but believe we must do it the right way – in a manner that protects the environment, benefits the public not just corporate interests, includes robust conservation measures and will not see low-carbon energy used to subsidize dirty greenhouse gas intensive industries such as coal-mining. We must also do it in a way that recognizes the incredible value BC’s wilderness, old-growth forests and delicate ecosystems play in the fight against global warming.

Instead our provincial government is moving ahead with plans to promote the development of climate-changing coal mines such as Klappan and Groundhog in Northern BC with new power lines and subsidized electricity. They are also increasing subsidies to the oil and gas sector, terminating energy conservation programs such as Live Smart BC, and spending billions on massive highway and airport expansion projects. We need to power down these destructive policies now!

There is a right way to do green power. The Wilderness Committee and communities across the province strongly support green power that is:

- Regionally planned;
- Built with high environmental standards;
- Acceptable to First Nations and local communities; and,
- Publicly owned.

We have the ability to do green power right:

With democratic oversight and public ownership – working with the people of British Columbia instead of against them. We can give people real power in the planning process instead of ignoring local concerns. We can champion conservation efforts and build a truly sustainable future that will benefit all of us, and we can ensure that green energy development is used to fight climate change, not to subsidize coal mines. We can move towards a green and sustainable economy in a manner that is accountable and transparent, allowing us to engage in long-term energy planning and provides for BC’s future energy security needs without compromising the ecological health of our streams and rivers. Join the Wilderness Committee and hundreds of thousands of British Columbians across the province in saying yes to democracy, to planning, and to the public control of our rivers.

Saving BC’s rivers one step at a time

Step 1: Contact BC’s Premier today and tell him how much you want your rivers to remain WILD and your power to remain PUBLIC.

It’s time to plug the plug on Private Power!

Premier of BC, Write Now!
Gordon Campbell
Room 156, Parliament Buildings,
Victoria, BC, V8W 1X4
Ph: 250 387-1715 Fax: 250 387-0087
Email: premier@gov.bc.ca

Step 2: Help distribute this newspaper in your community.

Email us at rivers@wildernesscommittee.org and let us know how many you want us to mail to you to give to family, friends, coworkers and local businesses.

Step 3: Join 10,000 Voices for BC Rivers. Around BC, thousands of people are taking action to keep their rivers wild and power public. Visit www.10000Voices.org to find out how!

YES!

I WANT TO STAND UP FOR BC’S RIVERS!

Enclosed is: $25 $50 $100 Other $ ________

I want to become a member of the Wilderness Committee! Enclosed is my annual fee for a: $35 Individual Membership $52 Family Membership

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE
PROV
CITY
POSTAL CODE
EMAIL

The Wilderness Committee is Canada’s largest membership-based wilderness preservation organization.

Citations

3 www.buteinlet.net/sites/default/files/publications/DEREGULATION_IN_BC-060929.pdf
7 Groundhog in Northern BC with new power lines.

Resources

BC Citizens for public power www.citizensforpublicpower.ca
BC Creek Protection Society www.bc-creeks.org
Save Our River Society www.watershed-watch.org
Take Back the Power publicpowerbc.ca
Wilderness Committee www.wildernesscommittee.org
Wildsight www.wildsight.ca
Watershed Watch www.watershed-watch.org

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