

# B.C. must get serious about its water supply

BY BEN PARFITT AND JESSE BALTUTIS, OPINION NOVEMBER 15, 2012

In 2010, the South Peace Region, downstream from the massive W.A.C. Bennett Dam, was so arid that the province ordered natural-gas companies to temporarily halt their water withdrawals from local rivers and streams.

That same year, far to the south in the state of Nevada, the water impounded by the iconic Hoover Dam plummeted to a level not seen in 54 years, forcing a one-quarter cut in hydroelectricity production.

The two events, separated by thousands of kilometres, demonstrate how vulnerable hydroelectric power production can be to climate change. But there is another aspect to such events that often goes overlooked. We also need energy to pump, heat and treat water.

We may not often think about the close interconnections between our water and energy resources. But now, more than ever, we must. Climate change, increasing industrial demands for both water and energy and our growing population demand it.

Consider, further, that in 2010 B.C. also recorded an electricity trade deficit, meaning that the province imported more electricity than it exported. It was the fifth time in 10 years that such a deficit occurred, compared with only once in the previous 20 years.

The increasing frequency of such deficits strongly suggests that we are beginning to confront limits in our ability to produce enough power for domestic needs.

This, then, is an ideal time to ask much-needed questions, including what impact the B.C. government's economic and jobs plan, which calls for eight new mines and three liquefied natural gas plants by the end of the decade, will have on our critically important water and energy assets.

To facilitate the government's plan, B.C.'s hydroelectric grid is undergoing a massive expansion. In the northwest of the province, a 344-kilometre transmission line is being pushed into the headwaters of the Skeena, Nass and Stikine rivers to provide power to new open-pit mines and what could soon be a sprawling network of coal-bed methane gas wells. A hydro transmission expansion of even greater magnitude is in the works for the northeast quadrant of the province, which would set the stage for accelerated production of some of the most water-draining, energy-sucking natural gas on Earth.

It is inconceivable that such expansions can occur without adverse impacts on water and hydro resources.

We need to get serious about understanding exactly how much water big consumers use - something, incredibly, that the province does not currently do. As just one example, of the 31 water

licences issued to pulp and paper companies - big water and hydro users - only one requires water metering. This is unacceptable in a province where natural-resource industries are a fixture of economic life.

Our government also places public water and hydro resources at risk when it fails to value them properly. Natural gas companies, for example, pay at most \$2.75 to Victoria for each Olympic swimming pool's worth of water withdrawn from rivers, lakes and streams - water that is rendered so toxic that it is permanently removed from the water cycle. The corresponding charge in Quebec is \$175.

We believe there are four things that can be done immediately to set the stage for improved management and governance of these critical resources.

The first is to require that all major water-users report fully on the water they withdraw, including water withdrawn from hydroelectric reservoirs, and that the provincial government publish such information.

The second is to charge more for water and electricity use in a manner that ensures that price increases are equitably shared and that lower-income earners are not disproportionately affected. Conservation gains alone could save growing communities tens of millions of dollars on new water-delivery and treatment infrastructure.

The third is to promote policies that result in energy being captured from currently underutilized waste streams. This is sometimes referred to as resource recovery, a prime example of which is found in the Southeast False Creek area of Vancouver, where up to 16,000 residents will one day derive most of their heat from the under-passing sewage stream.

And the fourth is to promote policies that better protect watershed lands, recognizing that conserving water flows in such landscapes safeguards our water and hydro resources.

One thing that's certain about climate change is that it means more uncertainty ahead. In the face of such uncertainty, regulations that encourage the wise use and conservation of our water and energy resources should be a public policy priority.

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