



Wild Lands Advocate 9(2): 7-8, April 2001

Hay-Zama: Smart Move or Capitulation??

By Peter Lee

Why did the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that allows new industrial development in the Hay-Zama Wildland Park in northwestern Alberta?

A couple of days before Christmas 2000 I received in the mail a copy of the 3 inch thick report "Hay-Zama Complex Development Plan 2000/2001: Public Consultation Process Report" prepared by Ventus Energy Ltd. In that report is a MOU signed by six people, including Cliff Wallis of the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA). The MOU allows for industrial intrusions within the internationally significant Hay-Zama Wildland Park in northwestern Alberta.

The MOU's agreed-to-industrial-activities consist of 6 new gas wells, 1 gas well from an existing well pad, 4 oil wells from existing pads, 1 re-entry oil well, and all the associated facilities and pipelines to place the wells into production – all within the protected area.

I knew the background: the protracted and challenging negotiations, the diverse players, the recent establishment of the site as a Wildland Park under Alberta's Provincial Parks Act, the recognition the area had received as a RAMSAR site, meaning it has global significance as a bird area, and the long history of oil and gas activity in the site and surrounding region.

And I knew the achievements – a time limit set on petroleum and natural gas activities, which includes continuing with some historical developments and allowing new intrusions, all staged for removal by 2012.

Knowing all this did not answer my question: Why did the AWA sign a MOU that allows new industrial development in the Hay-Zama Wildland Park in northwestern Alberta? The AWA has been a beacon of 'sticking to it-ness' when it comes to taking the high ground on advocating for protection of Alberta's declining wilderness. And a 'beacon' to me is one who provides guidance, light and encouragement. The AWA historically seemed to agree with the late David Brower, who said: "Let the people we pay to compromise – the legislature – do the compromising ... Every time I compromise, I lose." Was the Hay-Zama MOU a winning or losing compromise?

Don't we have enough examples of failed negotiations with government and industry in trying to protect Alberta's wilderness? What did we learn from Special Places, Forest Conservation Strategy, Integrated Resources Planning and on and on... except that such processes have consistently led, for environmental groups, to insulting and dramatic failures?

Or am I mistaken and is the MOU is a stunning success? Did the phase-out timeline justify allowing new developments? Is the agreement enforceable on the company? What happens if Ventus sells out to another company after developing their wells and making a tidy profit? What is the precedent that is set for all other protected areas in Alberta? In other words, was AWA's complicity in this agreement worth it?

Are Environmental Organizations Still Relevant in Alberta?

Have Alberta environmental organizations become increasingly irrelevant during the reign of the Klein Regime? I remember the breathless hope and anticipation a decade ago, when Klein was Minister of Alberta Environment, that we finally had someone who cared. Are we still stuck in that phase?

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Created: May 9, 2002

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During the 1990s, when environmental initiatives were eviscerated (Forest Conservation Strategy, Environment Council of Alberta, Eastern Slopes Policy, Special Places) and when rapidly declining environmental conditions and political circumstances called for tougher, more confrontational tactics, what has been the response of most Alberta environmentalists? Has it been to politely pursue a misguided course of gentility, indiscriminate compromise, accommodation and capitulation?

Are Alberta environmentalists reduced to participating in any negotiations under any conditions and accept any compromise providing everybody "gets along" and remains friendly? Do we have so little political power? Has Klein so successfully neutralized Alberta's environmental movement that we have simply become a mosquito on the hindquarters of the industrial elephant?

The Alberta's political insiders I know view Alberta's environmental organizations as having virtually no impact, being composed of fractured, small groups, with no allies in industry or in rural constituencies and with low memberships, no media-savvy and oblivious to how the political game is played. I don't agree entirely with that view, it's just the view that seems to be held by the Alberta government and by Alberta industry.

And it is not that Alberta environmentalists have completely failed. In fact, we have triumphed here and there on a few issues, such as Whaleback and Kananaskis Country, Supreme Court challenges and raising alarm over this and that issue. But in achieving small triumphs, have we been able to produce one significant improvement in the protection of Alberta's environment? Things are in better shape than they would have been if the environmentalists had never existed in Alberta, but would they be in far better condition had environmentalists been bolder, more diverse, less compromising, and less polite?

Look at the staggering facts:

- There are presently an estimated 1.5-1.8 million km (about 4 times the distance from Earth to the Moon) of seismic lines in Alberta and this will significantly increase until conventional reserves are depleted by 2040. This fragmentation will escalate in coming decades through seismic activities and the 10,000-15,000 new wellsites, with associated infrastructure, being added to the existing 220,00 wellsites already in place. The industry's aging infrastructure is experiencing expensive pollution problems that Albertans will have to pay for, one way or another.
- Petroleum activities are increasingly focused in NE Alberta where there are estimates of 1.7 trillion barrels of bitumen, a non-conventional resource, that will be extracted by a dense network of steam injection wells with water supplied by the region's aquifers.
- According to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, "Petroleum producers must soon be allowed access to areas that are restricted because of environmental, land claim and regulatory issues if demand for natural gas is to be met..." (Globe and Mail, Dec. 6, 2000).
- Agriculture, although contributing only about 3% to Alberta's GDP, has an enormous effect on Alberta's landscapes, with 32% of the province in improved and unimproved farmland, concentrated in SE Alberta and the Peace River region. 95-98% of Alberta's Aspen Parkland region has been converted to agricultural use.
- Farmland and livestock densities and practices have a negative impact on water quality, riparian areas and wetlands. There are huge projected increases in populations of hogs and cattle over the coming decades.
- About one third of the province is leased to the forest industry. The rate of logging continues a decades-long exponential rise. Logging pressure is focused on old-growth forests. Between 1918 and 1997, a minimum of 15,000 km² of Alberta has been logged. This will escalate in coming decades.
- Over the next 20 – 30 years, at least another 30,000-40,000 km² will be cut under present forestry agreements. Recent studies indicate a severe wood supply problem due to cumulative impacts of





multiple land uses. Other forest values, such as wildlife and wilderness, will likely not be able to be accommodated.

If we have failed to date, given the above facts, is the single largest failure of the Alberta environmental movement been our reliance on the good faith of the Klein regime and industry, which is what the Hay-Zama MOU seems to depend on? Is such good faith a big lie? Is it only real in the wishful thinking of environmentalists?

Where is belly fire? Where is the willingness to be audacious, confrontational, unpopular and unphotogenic? Where is the confrontational irreverence?

Have we been sold, hook, line and sinker, the mythical triad of Incrementalism, Balance and Win-win Solutions? Or am I making too much of the Hay-Zama Wildland Park MOU that allows new industrial intrusions into an internationally significant ecological area and that the AWA signed?

