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Meridian Dam: How do you put a cost on the loss of a species?

By Shirley Bray

I attended the last of five public meetings regarding the Meridian Dam Preliminary Feasibility Study along with a group of about 80 other people. The goal of the meetings, according to the backgrounder, was "to get the public's help to identify topics and issues that may have been missed in preparing the framework for the study but need to be included in the study."

Terry Sly from Alberta Environment began by explaining the nature of the preliminary feasibility study and its parameters. People were then allowed to express concerns or raise questions they thought the study should address and these were written up and displayed on a screen.

All comments from all meetings will be available by the second week of September at www.saskwater.com or www.gov.ab.ca/env. Comments can be sent in until September 30, 2001 (to: Ms. D. Chan-Yan, Golder Associates Ltd., 10th Floor, 940 – 6 Ave. SW, Calgary, AB T2P 3T1, Fax: (403) 299-5606, e-mail: Meridian_Consultation@Golder.com) and the study will be completed Jan. 10, 2002. The organizers reiterated the commitment to release the study to the public at the same time that it will be given to the Minister of Environment.

Some of the many concerns raised were as follows. Kerry Brewin from Trout Unlimited wanted to know why the dam had never proceeded before, despite being studied several times. It seems that previous studies never considered all the issues before. There was concern regarding the objectivity of the study, how much detail it would have, and who would be assessing the final numbers, conclusions, assumptions and making the final decision about whether to proceed. Lorne Taylor, a proponent of the dam, an MLA in the area and also Environment Minister was perceived as being in a conflict of interest.

A number of people suggested using the money to research alternatives to the dam, especially ways of gaining energy by conserving energy and non-storage options. Other issues were water supply from the watershed and the effects of global warming, water supply to users downstream, instream flow needs (not well known for the South Saskatchewan River), the unsuitability of the soil for irrigation and potential for salt buildup in a short period of time, and the use of the water for export. Dr. Dixon Thompson from the University of Calgary, noted in a written statement that "according to the government's own modeling studies, there is little, if any water available for storage...Even if some water were available for irrigation licences, they would be the most junior licences in the Province and...would be first to be cut off when supplies were limited..."

One person questioned how much water would be lost into somewhat porous sandstone ground given the pressure of the water in the reservoir and how much would be lost by evaporation in the hot dry climate of southeastern Alberta. How many farmers would benefit and what would the water cost? Less than a hundred farmers live along the proposed reservoir and not all would necessarily switch to the expensive irrigation agriculture. How much electricity would actually be generated and how much would be required to pump the water up from the reservoir to the irrigation sites? The cost of the irrigation infrastructure would have to be added to the cost of the dam. Irrigation would only make more farms dependent on a fixed supply of water.





One person said that the cost-benefit analysis should not follow the one done for the Oldman Dam. In that analysis, he noted, among other questionable things, construction costs were listed under benefits. One must weigh the economic benefit from the dam and reservoir against the economic opportunities lost by the flooding. One person at the Medicine Hat meeting suggested that eco-tourism is growing faster than motorboating on lakes. Perhaps the simplest solution suggested was that if only a few farmers were going to benefit from the irrigation, why not just pay them each a couple of million and save.

Finally, how do you put a cost on the loss of habitat or the loss of a species?

Proponents of the dam expressed concern over the loss of their farms, their livelihoods and their communities. Bill Dearborn, of the Sandhills Economic Development Association, pushed the benefits of power generation and value-added agriculture. He was allowed a protracted speech at the end, unlike the other participants who were required to express their concerns in the form of suggestions or questions for the study to address.

Overall the mood was polite but decidedly against the dam. Next door, Cliff Wallis, spokesperson for the AWA on the Meridian Dam issue, held his own meeting. He announced that AWA is calling for the protection of the South Saskatchewan River Valley and adjacent uplands from the Saskatchewan-Alberta boundary to the vicinity of Medicine Hat as a "wild and scenic river" under the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act. If you would like to support this initiative, contact The Hon. Ralph Klein, Premier of Alberta, Room 307 Legislature Building, 10800 - 97th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B7. Phone: (780) 427-2251; Fax: (780) 427-1349; E-Mail: Premier@gov.ab.ca