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## A River For the Taking?

### A report of the Meridian Dam Public Forum, Oct. 5, 2001

By Shirley Bray

Medicine Hat mayor Ted Grimm, a self-professed prairie boy, used to be a proponent of the Meridian Dam. But a long leisurely plane trip over the South Saskatchewan River canyon changed his mind. "I flew over the River and I had a spiritual experience," he said. He used to think that growth and change were the important things, but now he believes that we are here to be good stewards and that we must consider the impact of our decisions on the seventh generation. Such was the opening address of the Meridian Dam public forum, sponsored by the Grasslands Naturalists to provide information on the area and the dam. Lorne Scott, a farmer from Indian Head, Saskatchewan, executive director of the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation and a former Saskatchewan Minister of the Environment was an enthusiastic chair of the meeting.

Terry Sly of Alberta Environment and the Alberta Project Manager for the Meridian Dam Pre-Feasibility study reviewed the elements of the study – a repeat of what he presented at the public meetings. Items brought forward for consideration at the public meetings were not covered in the original study outline included climate change, evaporative losses from the reservoir, filling rates, potential flooding due to upstream ice jams, CFB unexploded ordnances, and identification of key fish, wildlife and tree species. Developers of the study framework had also underestimated the impacts of oil and gas developments and downstream impacts. The study is to be completed by January 18, 2002 and will be available to the public.

Dr. Dixon Thompson, a Professor of Environmental Design at the University of Calgary, who has studied water management for over 25 years made many interesting points. He noted that there are 3 options for water management in the river: storage options, non-storage options, and making better use of what we have. He said that we have technical and economic solutions to supply management but politics and social issues often prevent their implementation. Water is a free resource and free resources are almost always open to abuse. The problem, he said, is not water, but clean water, which we tend to take and pollute. The promised benefits of the dam, irrigation, recreation and power cannot be maximized at the same time. The dam would not help with drought; it would only help those individuals who were using irrigation. Since irrigation is always subsidized, the question is how big should the subsidy be and which are the best soils to irrigate to maximize the return for the subsidy. He strongly suggested that environmental groups make a strong stand prior to any commitment to building the dam, rather than afterwards as in the case of the Oldman Dam.

Arlene Kwasniak, Executive Director of the Environmental Law Centre in Edmonton, gave an excellent presentation on the relevant acts and regulations that would be called upon should the Meridian Dam be given further consideration. At the federal level, the Fisheries Act, the Migratory Birds Convention Act, the Species At Risk Act, the Wildlife Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act would be called into play. At the provincial level some of the acts involved would be the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act, the historical Resources Act, the Water Act, the NRCB Act and others. Environmental assessments at federal and provincial levels would be required. If Prairie Coulees Ecological Reserve is flooded, then it must be de-designated, which requires public notice and a comment period. Kwasniak made a point of saying that these legal requirements were not "regulatory hurdles, hoops or impediments"





as suggested by some, but “bona fide legitimate requirements. It is slapping the government on the face to call them hurdles.”

A letter by Dwayne Good Stryker, on behalf of the Blackfoot Sovereign Nation, was read. They do not support the dam.

Lorne Fitch of the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Service, currently the Provincial Riparian Specialist and well known for the Cows and Fish program spoke about the differences between reservoirs and dams. The rapid and severe fluctuations that occur in irrigation reservoirs do not allow the creation of a littoral zone around the edge where vegetation and fish can flourish. Studies have shown that fish migrate down the South Saskatchewan River past the site of the dam and into the Red Deer River.

“We are not against you, we are against the dam,” Major Stu Gibson from CFB Suffield told proponents of the dam. The military has spent \$600,000 for an inventory study of the area and more on additional wildlife studies. Part of their training grounds will be flooded, and this would affect an agreement Canada has with Britain. With unexploded ordnances and live fire training, there is concern over the legal liability of the military regarding recreationists using the area. Currently travel on the river is restricted during periods of live fire training exercises.

Cliff Wallis of Cottonwood Consultants and AWA President asked why would we want to trade a nationally significant area for low value agriculture. Agriculture landscapes have a role to play but we have a lot of those already. The Great Plains is one of the most endangered natural habitats in North America. “I’ve been told to take the objective view,” he said. “Why should I? The other side doesn’t. This isn’t about science. It’s about a clash of values.” You can’t mitigate the loss of a landscape, he said.

Dr. Tom Power, a professor and Chairman of the Economics Department at the University of Montana told the audience that rural economies need to diversify in order to allow farming and rural living to continue. The future is unlikely to be built on agriculture, which is an important, but declining economic activity. “Free-flowing rivers, like dammed rivers, provide important economic values. The choice to dam or not to dam a river is not a choice between environmental values or economic values. Environmental values are economic values and dam construction in certain circumstances can be grossly uneconomic,” he said. Tom was involved in an economic analysis of the Oldman River Dam. His book, “Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies” is well worth reading.



Panel of Speakers: *from left to right*: Lorne Fitch, Stu Gibson, Cliff Wallis, Lorne Scott (standing), Arlene Kwasniak, Dixon Thompson, Tom Power, Terry Sly