

Updates

Alberta Peace River Dam Project Cancelled By TransAlta

Alberta's Peace River Valley received an early Valentine's Day present this year. On January 16, TransAlta Corporation withdrew its application to the Alberta Utilities Commission for a nine year extension of its Dunvegan Hydroelectric Project's approved construction deadline date. TransAlta cited substantial information requests from stakeholders, a potentially long and costly hearing process, and unfavourable project economics as reasons for its decision.

The 100 MW hydro project would have been built just upstream of Alberta's historic Dunvegan Bridge. It would have placed a spillway across the Peace River, raising its level by 6.6 metres and creating a headpond of 26 kilometres. TransAlta had sought to extend the project's construction date deadline from May 2014 to May 2023 without completing geotechnical, transportation and environmental studies that were supposed to fill information gaps as a condition of 2009 approvals. These approvals were granted to proponent Glacier Power Ltd., which has since been acquired by TransAlta. If project economics improve, TransAlta will have to re-apply for project approval with fully updated environmental impact studies.

AWA filed a Statement of Concern and information requests to TransAlta. We were concerned about TransAlta's reliance on an Environmental Impact Assessment written in October 2006, which had limited fish and plant survey data. We thought the EIA's key conclusions on fish populations and migration needed validation, as the Joint Review Panel itself had noted in 2009. For example, one fish species at the eastern edge of its distribution, prickly sculpin, has since been confirmed locally but was missing from Glacier's survey. Other important issues needed to be updated and assessed, including the need for the project, its greenhouse gas emis-

sions and flood resilience, impacts to other recently designated species-at-risk, and the cumulative environmental impacts on Alberta's Peace River Valley fish and wildlife from other approved and proposed projects.

Because of Alberta's restrictive 'directly and adversely affected' rules for standing in an industrial development application, AWA's concerns did not trigger a hearing. Fortunately, a local citizen's group, called Concerned Residents for Ongoing Service at Shaftesbury, did qualify for standing to trigger a hearing. The extension might well have been granted without their intervention. Hearings hold proponents accountable for important project impact studies. The crucial role played by 'genuine public interest' environmental groups such as AWA in development decisions, as illustrated by this project, should be recognized by reforming standing rules to allow their concerns to trigger a hearing.

The cancellation of the Dunvegan Project is great news for Alberta's Peace River Valley ecosystem. Important fish and wildlife populations would be harmed by another instream flow barrier and associated infrastructure, adding to BC dams' already considerable impacts. Alberta can transition to green energy without the significant damage to our vital river ecology that in-stream hydro brings.

- Carolyn Campbell