

New Year, New Start for Grassy Mountain

On March 21, 2016 the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) sent an email to Benga Mining Limited about their proposed coal mining project on Grassy Mountain in the Crowsnest Pass. The subject was “AER Environmental Assessment Major Deficiency Report” and requested that Benga provide a work plan and commitment to address all the deficiencies found in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The letter then details, in 20 pages, why the company’s EIA was incomplete.

The first issue is broad, where the methodology for the EIA is unclear and the word “significant” is used without a clear definition (the word “significant” is associated with a metric when used in an EIA, and it cannot be used without the proper calculations that are attached to it). Then, the AER goes on to pick apart the assessment in many sub-categories. They include conservation and reclamation, biodiversity, air, water, land, vegetation, wildlife, land-use, history, and socio-economic. In summary, the letter states the EIA was insufficient in every category imaginable.

To understand a bit more about what local residents had reported to the AER, AWA requested to see the letters of support and letters of concern that citizens sent in. These letters are officially a part of the public domain and can be accessed by submitting an information request to the AER.

Several letters of support for the mine were sent in. Small business owners are concerned understandably that the area population is declining and that there are not enough good-paying, year-long jobs. They want to attract people to help their businesses thrive so their families too can

thrive. Various drilling company representatives believe this project will provide work for their employees and fill much needed gaps in the province for employment. As one drill company representative explained, when the old mine companies left there was an employment vacuum. These concerned citizens hope the mine will bring in the type of jobs people can and want to do.

There were nearly twice as many letters of concern than there were letters of support. Some came from those who have lived in the area long enough to remember the experience of having an active coal mine nearby. These residents recount poor air quality, loud operations, and bright lights at night as just some of the acute damage and disturbance brought into their lives. For some of the families who have been in the Pass for nearly a century more damage to area waterways might threaten an entire way of life. Other residents cited the cumulative effects on the landscape and, given the extensive coal mining that has taken place throughout the region already, how this mine will add to those effects. Some wrote that this project will further add to the damaged critical habitat of westslope cutthroat trout. What is good for this fish is good for other mountain fish, the raptors



Some of the scars on Grassy Mountain PHOTO: © B. VERBEEK

that eat them, and humans, especially those of us who enjoy hunting, fishing, and gathering on the land.

One letter of support stood out from the rest, as the author spoke of the prospect of successful remediation that is promised by the company. It's overly optimistic to support a mining project based on the hope the company will carry out the proper remediation the site has needed for decades. Taking something that is broken, breaking it even more, and then promising to fix it all twenty-five years later doesn't feel right. With the concerns of the supporters in mind, it's useful to step back and take a look at the larger context of this project. The boom and bust nature of the resource extraction sector seems to be ineffective in long-term, stable job creation—the Crowsnest Pass knows from the past, as the drill company representatives described, that the jobs are actually temporary. Given the nature of this type of economic enterprise we should expect it to happen again: peo-

ple will move to the town and work while they can and move on when it's over.

We do not need the coking coal that will be extracted, not here in Alberta nor anywhere in Canada, and the market for the material across the ocean in Asia is uncertain. The appetite for healthy living, however, has only increased. As more people come to terms with the negative side-effects of living in cities, towns such as Blairmore become appealing to visitors from near and far who are seeking fresh air, clean water, good fishing, and a taste of a nature-oriented version of the good life. People will fall in love with the wilderness that still exists throughout the Crowsnest Pass and it will empower them to take the chance to live there. The history of coal mining can fade into the past as we move forward, together, away from failed models of economic development towards more sustainable, stable communities. There is a lot of work that can be done to restore ecosystems to the point where the land itself can once again

support us.

Perhaps the government would take a step back and consider the letters received as a plea for help and as a challenge to respect their ideas of what "livelihood" means – a healthy landscape and fulfilling employment. It's imperative for government to give as much attention to long-term, small-town economic development as they do to urban centres such as Calgary or Edmonton. It's reasonable for the people of the Crowsnest Pass to ask the government to help them find ways to remediate and restore the old mine sites and to try to build a local economy less dependent on resource extraction. The residents of the Crowsnest Pass deserve a government that will work proactively to deliver this vision.

- *Esther Bogorov*