

- [ICBC to give customers a break](#)
- [More Latest News](#)

Get the daily headlines emailed to you every morning with the Vancouver Sun newsletter.

Email Address:

submit ▶

- [Our Privacy Statement](#)

Alberta natives vow to fight Site C: BC HYDRO I Proposed third Peace River dam would be the 'death of the delta

Ed Struzik, Vancouver Sun

Published: Friday, October 28, 2005

Alberta natives vow to fight Site C: BC HYDRO I Proposed third Peace River dam would be the 'death of the delta'

Vancouver Sun

Saturday, July 3, 2004

Page: E1 / FRONT

Section: Businessbc

Byline: Ed Struzik

Dateline: FORT CHIPEWYAN, Alta.

Source: Edmonton Journal

Series: Trouble On The Peace

FORT CHIPEWYAN, Alta. - Moments after the air boat lands on the marshy shore of the Quatre Fourches River, cowboy Joe Wandering Spirit steps out from a clearing in the tangled brush where he keeps a team of 10 dogs tied up all summer in the Peace-Athabasca delta of Wood Buffalo National Park.

The 66-year-old Cree seems comfortable in this confusing place, with its perpetual cycle of drying and flooding and its endless,

meandering channels that resemble so many serpents.

 [Email to a friend](#)  [Printer friendly](#)

Font:

- *
|
- *
|
- *
|
- *
|



Land in the delta is never safe. The rivers and streams can easily flow in different directions during different times of the year -- if they flow at all -- and sometimes spill over the banks.

Just last year, Wandering Spirit tells us, he had to move downstream to higher ground when it appeared an ice jam was going to cause the river near his tiny home to flood.

Spanning more than 5,000 square kilometres, the Peace-Athabasca is the largest boreal freshwater delta in the world. Half land, half water, it supports the world's largest free-roaming bison herd as well as 219 other species of mammals, birds and fish. Millions of swans, geese, ducks and other waterfowl feed or nest here each year. Few other wetlands on the continent support so much wildlife.

Not long ago, Wandering Spirit shared the delta with nearly 400 men and women who also made a living trapping, hunting and fishing. But times have changed.

Nowadays, the only steady company he keeps are his dogs, a crazy chewed-up cat, and the pin-up centrefolds from men's magazines that part-time trappers and park wardens from Fort Chipewyan hand him when they're passing through.

The delta is growing at a rate of 19 hectares per year. Since the 1960s, 38 per cent of the water covering the delta has evaporated. Hundreds of lakes that once relied on the natural flooding cycles on the Peace and Athabasca rivers have disappeared or have shrunk to one-third of their size.

"It's an environmental disaster," says Archie Waquin, chief of the Mikesew Cree. "There was a time when this was the richest fur trading post in North America. Now, almost no one can make a living out there. I can't even get out to my cabin in the delta any more because the water is so shallow."

Like nearly everyone in Fort Chipewyan, Waquin pins much of the

blame on the W.A.C. Bennett Dam that BC Hydro built nearly 1,000 kilometres upstream on the Peace River in the 1960s.

The project was so big that it took nearly 5,000 people to build it and five years to fill the reservoir behind it with water.

Neither Waquin nor anyone else in the town of Fort Chipewyan will ever forget they were not told about the project until it was already under construction.

"Used to be a trapper could get 60 to 70 muskrats a day," says Reg McKay, a member of the Mikesew Cree Nation who started trapping in the delta in 1950.

"A real good trapper like Ernie Bourke, who died a few years ago, would get double that," recalls McKay. "All he needed to get going in the morning was 10 cups of coffee and 10 cigarettes. But not long after they built that dam, things started drying up. It got so bad that some people were using their dog teams to pull their skiffs across Mamawi Lake."

Now, BC Hydro is dusting off a plan to construct another dam, at Site C, on the Peace River. The dam would be built seven kilometres southwest of Fort St. John and would produce 5,000 gigawatt hours of power a year. BC Hydro says the timeline for the \$3-billion project is nine years, and the B.C. cabinet will decide its fate.

News of the project is being greeted with disbelief and despair in northeastern Alberta.

"It will be the death of the delta," predicts 77-year-old Andrew Campbell, standing in the middle of two-metre-high reed grass that now lines the shore of Lake Athabasca near his home in Fort Chipewyan.

"We've lost eight, nine feet of water from the lake already.

"Before the [Bennett] dam, I could park my boat right here," he says, pointing to a line of sand that once marked the shoreline. "To do that now, I'd have to drag it a quarter mile out through these weeds to get to water."

The son of an Orkney Islands man who settled in Fort Chipewyan and married a Cree woman, Campbell was just seven years old when he learned to trap.

"When I set my first trap, I couldn't wait to get a [musk]rat. I kept going back and forth to check on it. When I finally got one though, I just couldn't kill it. I had to get my uncle to do it."

Campbell's trap line was centred around Egg Lake, a 40-kilometre trip by dog team from Fort Chipewyan through Wood Buffalo National Park.

As one of the largest perched basins -- near-shore lakes that depend on the flooding of the Peace and other rivers -- in the delta, it once set the standard for quality muskrat pelts purchased by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Today, however, most of Egg Lake has been invaded by grass and willow. Some years, it's bone-dry.

"I never learned to read or write, but I can tell you anything you want to know about this country," says Campbell. "And I'll tell you it's a crime what those engineers did to this part of the world. This is supposed to be a national park and one of them bird sanctuaries. You'd never know it the way they've treated the delta."

Eighty per cent of the delta lies within Wood Buffalo National Park. The delta is the main reason why Wood Buffalo was designated a World Heritage site by a United Nations committee, and why it's been declared a wetland of international significance under the Ramsar Convention, a treaty signed by more than 130 countries, including Canada.

Like the Cree, Chipewyan and Metis, Parks Canada was caught off-guard when BC Hydro announced in the 1960s that it was going to build the Bennett Dam. In those days, megaprojects such as the dam did not have to undergo rigid environmental reviews.

For some time after, the agency took a lead role in trying to determine what impact, if any, the dam was having on the delta, and what could be done to mitigate the damage. But budget cuts and other priorities have left the agency relatively silent on the issue for the past five years. Parks Canada's position on Site C might be characterized as "wait-and-see."

That hasn't been the case with the Alberta government.

When BC Hydro announced in April that it was pulling the Site C proposal off the shelf, Alberta Environment Minister Lorne Taylor reacted with anger and frustration.

Noting that Alberta and Saskatchewan have had a transboundary water agreement for almost 60 years, Taylor said: "It's unfortunate that we do not have an agreement with British Columbia."

"We've been trying to get one, and they've been dragging their feet, and maybe this dam is the reason why."

As things stand now, Alberta must allow 50 per cent of its water flow to pass into Saskatchewan. Alberta officials are looking for much more from their neighbour to the west.

They're seeking a deal that would see both provinces manage dams on the Peace to restore water levels in the delta and to reduce the potential for ice jam flooding along the Alberta/B.C. border that would affect towns like Peace River.

Robert Harrison, head of partnerships and strategic planning for Alberta Environment, notes that some progress has been made on that front. He says memorandums of understanding now compel B.C. to inform Alberta about any project that might affect water flows. He also points out joint efforts to reduce ice jam flooding have gone a long way toward protecting the town of Peace River.

"A dam such as Site C would also invoke a number of federal environmental review processes. B.C. and the federal government could decide to work together on those processes or they could handle them separately. Either way, we would have legal standing and make submissions to both."

"What we don't want is to be blind-sided again," he said. "We want to be able to assess the details of the proposal very early on and determine as soon as possible whether there will be ecosystem problems or any changes in the delivery of water to the province."

If Alberta gets its way, says Harrison, there will be an agreement in place that gives the province a say in the operation of BC Hydro.

"What we're aiming for is a bilateral agreement that dictates how much water we get, when we get that water, what kind of quality that water will be, and how that water will affect ecosystem interests.... Ultimately, we'd like to be able to influence the operation of their hydro plants to improve the situation on the Peace-Athabasca and to ensure we don't have extreme flooding upstream."

Site C, he adds, would be a relatively minor factor in the management plan.

"The Williston Reservoir above the Bennett Dam really regulates about 95 per cent of the water flow [on the Peace] in the province," he says. "Site C would represent the other five per cent."

Metis and First Nations leaders in Alberta, however, won't even

contemplate the idea of another dam.

If BC Hydro does anything, it should be finding a way to restore water levels in the delta, not building a dam, says Waquin. "Mark my words, this isn't going to happen. If they try, I'll mobilize every first nation from here [downstream] to the Arctic Ocean to stop them because everyone from here down the Mackenzie River is going to be affected by this."

The Cree and Chipewyan of Fort Chipewyan have challenged dam projects on the Peace before. In 1997, they filed lawsuits seeking compensation from BC Hydro for damage the Bennett Dam allegedly caused.

Two years ago, the Chipewyan settled out of court for \$4 million without getting BC Hydro to admit that it was at fault. The Cree, however, have refused to settle.

BC Hydro's position is interesting. For nearly two years, the Crown corporation had a link on its website that admitted "the annual floodwaters, which kept the vast marshlands of the delta wet and productive, were hidden behind the dam.

"The populations of several fish species declined," the link went on to say. "And the lower water levels caused much of the marsh to dry up, reducing the nesting habitat of thousands of migratory waterfowl."

The muskrat harvest, Hydro noted on its site, dropped from 38,000 pelts to fewer than 2,000 in the four years after the dam began operation.

"Dikes [designed] to retain water in parts of the wetlands reduced the damage, but habitat for tens of thousands of birds and animals was lost."

When the Edmonton Journal asked the utility in mid-June to explain the anomaly, Hydro officials had the link removed within an hour, insisting it was all a mistake.

"The information was wrong," says Alan Chan-McLeod, a BC Hydro scientist. "It was work that was contracted out. Unfortunately, it was one of those cases where the left hand didn't know what the right was doing. That was not BC Hydro's position."

Hydro insists studies commissioned by the utility over the past decade indicate the dam has had a negligible impact on the health of the delta.

One of its contract scientists, in fact, suggests the ecosystem "stands out as a paragon of ecosystem health compared to other major deltas in North America."

"The delta has changed and the changes we are seeing are dramatic," says Kevin Timoney, an Edmonton-based scientist.

"But that's the nature of delta ecosystems. If you look at the historical record through the study of sediment cores and tree rings, you'll find that the delta has been drier many times in the past than it is now. What we are seeing now falls within the range of normal."

Timoney also says that flooding cycles in the delta remain pretty much what they were during the pre-Bennett Dam era.

- [Home](#)
- [Great home delivery subscription deals here!](#)

Ads by Google

B.C. Salmon Fishing Lodge

Luxurious 1941, 85ft Tugboats tow
18ft Skiffs to fish BC's Hot Spots
www.tugboatcruise.com

Queen Charlotte Islands

Exclusive Waterfront Properties
Located 15 min from Masset
www.Niho.com/qci

Aboriginal Housing Awards

Improving access to housing?
Be Recognized! Apply to CMHC today
cmhc.ca
