

Premier's climate-change hypocrisy could doom first nation's way of life

Allowing major plant to avoid building a carbon capture storage facility should not be an option

By Chief Kathie Dickie, Special to the Sun
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We are the Fort Nelson First Nation. We have just under 800 members comprising 14 major families. You may not have heard of us, or have yet to visit the far northeastern corner of the province that is our home, but we're here. And right now, we're trying to reconcile the Premier's words on preventing climate change and advancing first nations with his performance in our backyard.

Calgary-based EnCana Corporation, Canada's largest gas producer, along with a consortium of seven other oil companies, is planning to build the biggest gas processing plant in North America in the heart of our 1910 treaty territory. The Cabin Gas Plant, with its related infrastructure and pipelines, is a multi-billion-dollar project designed to open up B.C.'s Horn River Basin to shale gas development.

Like your community -- like any community -- we'd welcome the jobs, economic opportunities, and tax revenues such a development would deliver to the province. But, like any community, we have concerns.

The B.C. Environmental Assessment Office has declared the Cabin Gas Plant will have significant adverse environmental effects. The last time such a declaration was made -- the Kemess North mine -- the project did not receive an environmental assessment certificate. The risks of significant adverse environmental, social and cultural effects outweighed the project's economic and social benefits. It is our hope that a similar common-sense ruling will apply to the proposed Cabin Gas Plant.

Indeed, the Cabin Gas Plant is expected to be the largest point source emitter of greenhouse gases in B.C. EnCana anticipates that the gas plant will emit 2.2 million tonnes of CO₂ annually, the equivalent of adding 450,000 cars to B.C.'s roads each year. In all, the Cabin Gas Plant will increase B.C.'s annual greenhouse gas emissions by 3.3 per cent.

We support the idea of a plant. And we believe in action on climate change.

EnCana's initial proposal of a carbon capture storage system for the plant has now been dropped as too expensive. Meanwhile, 15 kilometres away from the proposed plant, Spectra Energy has proposed a similar, smaller, gas plant. Unlike EnCana, Spectra remains committed to carbon capture storage in the Fort Nelson area. The Fort Nelson First Nation cannot support the installation of a massive gas plant without a carbon capture storage facility.

We've been told many things by the B. C government as we've tried to participate in the environmental assessment process. One official said that because our 100-year-old treaty doesn't

specifically address clean air, we have no say on clean air when it comes to the construction of the biggest greenhouse gas creator in B.C. Imagine being told by a government official in 2009 that you have no say on the quality of air you or your children breathe! What parent would stand for it?

We are Dene, and our traditions and customs and practices have revolved around moose, fur-bearers and freshwater fish since time immemorial. Most of our families still practice traditional lifestyles -- hunting, trapping, harvesting, and fishing -- living off the land year round. Every September, community bonds are renewed through the fall moose hunt, with its traditions and practices that remind us of our shared heritage.

All this will be lost -- cut to pieces -- by the plant site and the vast development that it will bring to the Horn River Basin which is already seeing roads, pipelines, and drill sites destroying habitat, game trails, and trap lines in the last and best land in our territory.

We understand the value to the province of shale gas development in the Horn River Basin. But such economic development, whether for our community or yours, should not come at the expense of a gutting of the land, water, and air where a community lives. We are the only Treaty 8 Nation that lives within the Horn River Basin, and this gas plant, designed to open the basin to drilling, pipelines and gas development, will have an immense effect on our rights and interests. Without the capacity to determine and plan for this development, the survival of the Fort Nelson First Nation is in jeopardy. This plant and the development that it brings must not mean the end of us.

It is a proud moment for us all when the premier declares his passion for carbon reduction and aboriginal rights. But if he's saying that while he's railroading a first nation in order to construct a massive greenhouse gas emitter, that's worse than hypocrisy. It's a reminder that in all these decades, nothing has changed -- that protecting the environment and working with first nations are to be done only when it's convenient for the B.C. government.

What we seek is eh'thee oh t'deh. That's Dene for "balance: it is even." Here in our part of this province, that means working together so that those who live off the land can continue to do so and those who want to pursue family-supporting jobs in the sensible development of shale gas production can do so as well.

We live in a place where winter arrives in October and doesn't leave until April, and where clean air and fresh water are among our few tangible assets. And we are a community in B.C. We believe that, like any community in B.C., we deserve the opportunity to try and seek a balance for our community.

We believe that when a large industrial complex and infrastructure are proposed for a community in B.C., the community deserves the right to try and plan for it in a way that advances the community interest, not destroys it. And we believe that a government that champions certain values in front of the world should not be engaged in actively working to destroy these same values at home.

Like your community, though, we are not uniform in our outlook. Like your community, we are made up of those who want to pursue traditional ways and those who want the opportunity to pursue different economic goals. Achieving balance between the traditional and the new development will test us all. We are only one generation out of the residential schools and, as in any community, the old and the new do not always sit easily together.

Ignoring us or excluding us because the reality of our existence is an inconvenient truth to bureaucrats or the Premier is not an alternative for this or any first nation. We should be participating fully in the effort to achieve balance.

The path to balance can start with something as simple as a demonstration of respect. Other times, it takes the courts. We hope the B.C. premier, who holds the honour of the Crown and our community in his hands, chooses respect.

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