

Comments on Proposed Routing and Re-Routing of Transmission Line around the East End of McLeod Bay, Great Slave Lake, and Crossing the Narrows Between Maufelly and Fairchild Points

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Attention: Alan Ehrlich
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Sent by e-mail. Confirmation of Receipt Requested.

Good Day:

On this bright and mild winter morning I am looking out the window of our home, across McLeod Bay to Maufelly Point and the south end of the Fairchild Peninsula. For the first time in recorded history, it is sad to say that we are this winter the only full-time residents of this area. Sad to say, because little by little the area is losing its year-round human presence. The broader societal and cultural reasons for that are not the issue here, but the area's lack of year-round "locals" does in some ways bear on the proposal by Deze Energy to route electrical-power transmission wires across the narrows at Reliance, up the Fairchild Peninsula, then north and northwest to diamond mines far distant from here.

Were Reliance still the small and active settlement that it has been – and which, perhaps along with the creation of a National Park, **it may once again become** – I doubt very much that such a proposal as the routing of a transmission line across the stunningly beautiful and dramatic narrows between Maufelly and Fairchild Points would be seriously under consideration.

When I first heard of this entire Taltson proposal I was surprised. My surprise has turned to suspicion as the proposal has gained momentum. In my years as a bush pilot I have often looked at the little power station down at Taltson River, and wondered how it could be considered a truly viable source of hydro power. Obviously there is much I do not know about hydro-power generation, because to the layman's eye there certainly does not seem to be much potential power there, i.e. no big drop, no big volume. It further baffled me to learn that other rivers around McLeod Bay were being considered and metered, as possible "feeders" to this grandiose hydro power scheme.

My bafflement seems especially justified in the past two years, as we have watched the river flows in watersheds all around us drop dramatically, and the level of McLeod Bay

reach new historic low levels. As of freeze-up this past October, I have never in our 23 years of year-round residence here seen our “local” river, the Hoarfrost, at such a low level. By early November the “river” would more appropriately have been called a “creek” or a “stream.” Also, for the second year in a row, we seem to be on our way to setting a new record low for snow accumulation. This winter we have less snow on this date than for any of our 23 carefully-documented years of residence here. Throughout the treeline and tundra areas immediately to the north of us, lake and river levels are dropping off dramatically. Small taiga and tundra ponds are disappearing completely as their permafrost “bathtub plugs” melt away.

Whatever the cause, the climate is in a time of notably rapid fluctuation and unpredictability. In a time of dramatic and unpredictable climate pattern changes, both locally and globally, all bets should be off as to what the future will bring for watersheds and water levels – **and thus for hydro-power generation** – throughout this entire region.

I state this because I believe there is more here than initially meets the eye. I suspect there is a more grandiose vision underlying the current proposal. Once a main line is in, feeder lines will gain viability. **That** is the appeal which this route around the east end of the lake holds for its proponents, when another alternative would route the line northwest toward Thor Lake (Avalon) and Yellowknife. Over time other rivers and watersheds will be affected, and the proposed line will grow and spread – or some hydro-power visionary in an office somewhere hopes it will. But water levels and climate changes are not predictable.

It is a huge gamble – perhaps to be bailed out by the taxpayers of Canada, and certainly not to be rescued by those mines and venture-capitalist shareholders in mining companies who will supposedly be the grateful recipients of this power.

And where is this gamble being played out? Well, namely, right across the heart of an area which is on the verge of becoming a fully protected National Park. This park proposal has been on the back burner since 1970 – 40 years ago! – and it is finally nearing some real decisions and action. Debating the park is yet another sideline to the issue here at hand, but the point to make is that the park proposal has serious support and a momentum it has never had until now. The Geological Survey of Canada has nearly completed its Mineral and Energy Resource Assessment of the proposed park area, and will table that report soon. The community of Lutsel K’e has at last come close to throwing its full support behind this proposal. And now we are considering running a high-voltage transmission line right across this world-class wilderness of pristine lakes, forests and tundra, likely to soon become one of the crown jewels of the National Park system in Canada?

14 years ago, while in Yellowknife awaiting the birth of our first daughter, I made a brief presentation to the BHP diamond mine environmental review. The gist of my little spiel (my precise comments can be found in the record of those hearings) was to say – Yes, go ahead, approve the mine. A diamond mine is, in the grand sweep of things, temporary, and if done right, innocuous. But we **MUST** immediately begin setting aside and

delineating a minimum of 32 million acres of wilderness and wildlife preserves across the (then undivided) territories of Nunavut and the NWT.

Yesterday that same daughter of ours turned 14 years old. We celebrated with a long 25-mile run by dogteam up into the area northeast of our home, and lunch at a little tent camp around the woodstove. Tracks of caribou, muskox, moose, wolves, wolverine... sunshine, unbelievably mild dry weather and shallow snow cover (see above!) -- a wilderness completely untouched by mankind. This reservoir of silence and absolute wilderness is a resource in and of itself, a treasure which if we are wise we can delineate and protect here in truly large chunks, even as the demands of our economy and northern employment move forward.

Yet 14 years have passed and nothing truly momentous has been accomplished in this regard. It will help all sides in these debates to move forward and clearly delineate boundaries, parks, preserves, and areas for development. We cannot wait another 14 years.

At the ripe old age of 52, I am no ranting environmental fanatic. I realize that, as a close friend of ours in the mining industry says, "If you can't grow it, you have to mine it." What are solar panels and wind turbines and smart cars and microchips made from? Not wood, not corn, but minerals. It is well to keep this in mind. The world needs minerals. Northern Canada can provide raw materials to a greener world, by way of many different mines for many different kinds of minerals – all of which will bring employment and royalty dollars to northern people. The mining industry can live side by side with parks, wilderness preserves, wildlife refuges. Its energy demands can be fed by "green" hydro projects and transmitted through long, expensive transmission lines – **if and when and where those lines make sense.**

Which leads to another nagging question: why not send the power from Taltson to the users who are **actively** lobbying to receive it, i.e. Thor Lake (Avalon) and – lying directly in line with that user – the city of Yellowknife. The power grids from Taltson and Snare can then be linked. If there are users to the north and northeast of Yellowknife – known users actively requesting a source of electricity, not just dubious "maybe" mines giving lip service to using power "if and when" it is made easily available to them at the "right" price – then a line can be built to further expand this grid.

What we have here is the old line from the movie *Field of Dreams*, based on a book by William Kinsella – "***If you build it, they will come.***" The protagonist hears this phrase as a mysterious voice. He builds a ballpark in his cornfield and suddenly the ghosts of the White Sox appear and begin to play ball. Perhaps some visionary at Deze Energy hears this same sort of voice. If he routes this line around the east end of the lake, mines will appear, all clamoring for his power. He is intent on dangling over 600 kilometres of transmission line out across remote and rugged forest and tundra, in a time of rapid and unpredictable climate change and economic upheaval – right through the idyllic haven of Reliance and right across the heart of the single most significant National Park proposal to come along in many decades – **and he is, in effect, doing this all "on spec!"**

Well, like I said, I am baffled. But not really. This is the thin edge of the wedge. If you build it, they will come, and if you build it around the **east** end of the big lake, you can more easily feed other lines and watersheds into it.

It is much more sensible and safe though, to send the power to KNOWN users. We cannot risk this as BAIT for POSSIBLE users, who then will hold the cards when it comes to negotiating the price per kilowatt-hour. It is too big to build “on spec.”

Another facet of this issue bears mentioning, on a personal level. In 2006, after 14 years with Air Tindi as a seasonal contract pilot, I, along with my wife Kristen, set out to run two small bushplanes as a commercial air service based here. The proposed Deze development, a stone’s throw from our backyard, could well translate into plenty of work for those little planes if this project goes ahead. If the line is re-routed west or abandoned altogether – or if I am tacitly “blacklisted” for coming out against it – much of that work will go to others. These are not easy times to run a mom-and-pop air service in the North. We have enormous monthly bank payments to make and we struggle to make them, while paying ourselves next to nothing. But I know where our loyalties lie. They lie with the land within which it has been our utmost privilege to make this life of ours – a dream for millions, a reality for us – over the past quarter century.

I trust one thing in that regard – there will always be work for us here, and for our little planes, if this wilderness remains unsullied. To turn the phrase: if we protect it, they will always come.

One other point: this is just a power line – it is not a new dam here, it is not a toxic waste dump or an oil or gas pipe with all the accompanying hazards of spillage and so on. In the end, from a purely prosaic standpoint, the line itself – slung buzzing across the narrows at Reliance and marching away to the north and south, will be nothing but an irritating eyesore. Somewhere down the millennia it will be graded back by the big white dozer blades of the next ice age. But the larger questions of “why” and “what if” and “paid for by whom,” and the un-quantifiable effect of the line on the character of the landscape, will always loom alongside the wires and towers themselves.

As for the specific question here – the routing up Maufelly and Fairchild Point at Reliance, please sign my family and I up as firmly *against* the routing of this transmission line across the narrows at Reliance: the dramatic and historic gateway to Pike’s Portage, the mouth of the Lockhart River, and the barrenlands beyond.

I am now heading out on the trail for several weeks with students and professors from Augustana College and the University of Alberta. We are off to the taiga and tundra by dogteam. Perhaps some years from today I will take a similar group north and east, only

to encounter a relic of shortsighted thinking – the power line someone wagered would find enough flowing water to feed itself, and enough industrial users to justify its existence. If built it will provide an interesting starting point for some discussions with students – about make-work projects, industrial development within world-renowned wilderness preserves, and the insatiable “needs” (read “wants”) of our consumer society, balanced against our deep appreciation for remote tracts of land and water, forests and fish and wildlife.

Thank you to the Board for seriously considering these thoughts from a person who has made a life, a home, and a living here, who travels these woods and waters each day, and who is trying hard to strike a balance between cold hard objectivity and deeply held emotions.

Sincerely,

Dave Olesen