

Wild Times



Wilderness Committee

Vacuuming Rivers

...and Wallets

by Joe Foy

A fellow I knew once told me how he spent a summer selling vacuum cleaners door to door in small towns on the prairies. He soon developed a simple three step programme. First, he would get invited into the home. Second, he would find dust under the sofa and in the corners. He'd talk and talk about potential health effects, until the dust bunnies under the couch took on the proportions of King Kong. And third, he just happened to have the solution to the "dust problem" in the trunk of his car – a brand new vacuum cleaner. In the wink of an eye people were making monthly payments on vacuum cleaners they didn't even know they needed!

That's exactly what is going on in BC right now with our wild rivers.

The BC Liberal government of Gordon Campbell has teamed up with private power companies to sell us unreliable hydro-power we can't use, can't afford, and don't want. And so far they are doing pretty good for themselves, with signed long-term contracts worth 31 billion dollars and hundreds of wild rivers staked for future power projects. If the massive Bute Inlet project goes through, the public will be on the hook to the private power guys for more than \$50 billion, which is larger than the provincial debt! Ever so grateful, the private power guys have been donating to the BC Liberals like crazy.

Joe Foy on the Blaeberry River at Thompson Falls, near Golden BC. There is a private power scheme to divert the river around the falls, which local people strongly oppose.

So, how did they do it?

It's been pretty much like selling vacuum cleaners. First, the provincial government invited the private power companies into the province by bringing in the 2002 Energy Plan.

The 2002 Energy Plan manufactures the need for private hydro-power by restricting BC Hydro's ability to plan and build new hydro power plants. BC Hydro has been ordered to buy power from the private guys, in long-term contracts at far above market rates. And Hydro has been ordered to buy a lot of power, in part because Hydro is no longer allowed to rely as much on Port Moody's Burrard Thermal power plant as a back-up for winter-time peak power use or for an emergency. The result has been a staking gold rush on BC's wild mountain rivers, as companies make plans to dam and divert them for power production.

But BC's wild mountain rivers freeze up in the winter months, which makes private power a lousy, unreliable, and expensive winter backup power source.

And that's exactly what the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC) ruled on July 27 when they stated that the BC government should rely on Burrard Thermal as a back-up power plant instead of the private power guys, and do more to conserve power.

The BCUC rightly concluded that, though the Burrard plant has a massive power potential, it sits idle for most of the time, like a spare tire in the back of a car. And, with the up-

grading of the power line from BC Hydro's Mica Dam and Revelstoke power plants to the Lower Mainland, the need to fire up Burrard Thermal will decrease even more. The BCUC also rightly points out that power conservation is always less expensive and better for the environment than new power production and that consequently BC Hydro should focus more on conservation.

The impacts from a private river diversion project are long lasting, and include permanent loss of fish and wild life.



Fire Creek being "prepared" for river diversion.

Plutonic Power Projects at Bute and Toba

Pull the plug on private power

River diversion makes very high cost and unreliable power, making it virtually useless as a backup source.

The BCUC ruling is a breath of fresh air in a province tired of the stink of the private power scam. Their ruling could end up saving a lot of BC's wild rivers from being needlessly dammed and diverted.

There are many ways that we in BC can lower our greenhouse gas emissions. Allowing the private power guys to bankrupt BC Hydro by forcing it to buy expensive, useless, unreliable power and ruin our rivers and streams is not one of them.

Expanding transit, not freeways, will have the biggest impact of all. A healthy BC Hydro – one of the planet's cleanest power companies – is our government's greatest public policy tool in the fight to lower our emissions.

I think that the thousands of British Columbians who have attended public meetings and written to oppose private power projects on the Pitt, Glacier, Howser, Bute and hundreds of other watersheds, want Premier Campbell to pay attention to the BCUC ruling and pull the plug on private power.



Joe Foy is Campaign Director for the Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership-based wilderness preservation organization, which has 28,000 members from coast to coast.



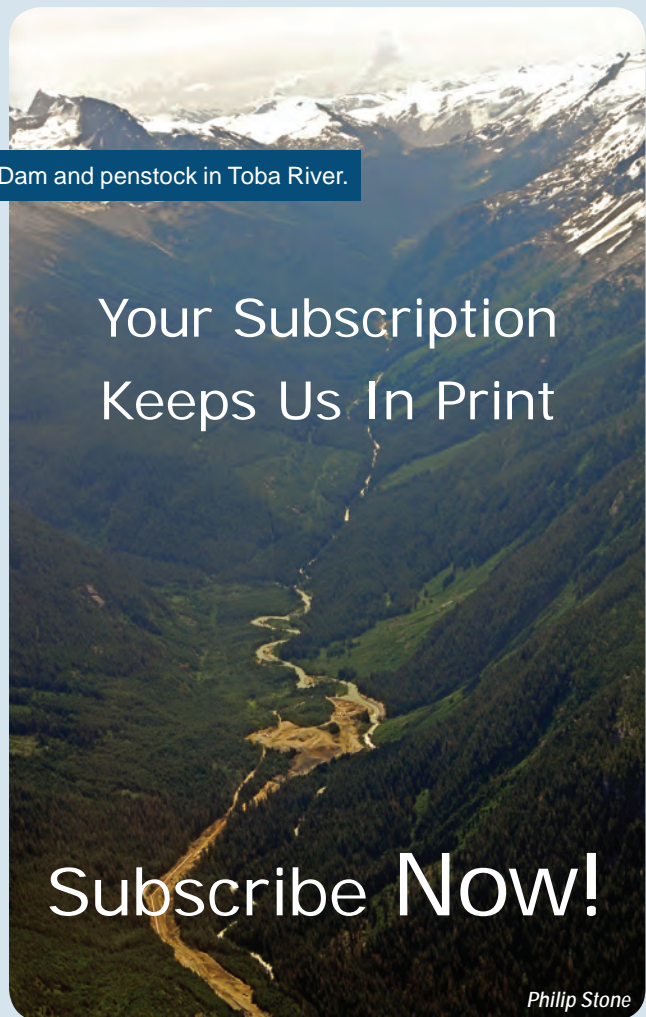
Powerhouse excavation on Toba River;

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Pass between Tahumming and Orford rivers, route of proposed transmission line between Bute and Toba inlets

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Dam and penstock in Toba River.

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