

Complexity?

Why is a highway more acceptable than a Hydro line?¹

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The Government of Manitoba has decided that a power line can't be built down the east side of Lake Winnipeg because it will impact the "pristine" boreal forest, upset environmentalists, endanger exports and compromise a potential World Heritage Site, yet a highway through the same area is fine!

The Manitoba government says the road benefits the communities in the region, but the power line does not. There is no doubt that the remote communities need better transportation, lower cost of importing goods from outside, and cheaper access to services unavailable locally. To penalize them because they live in a "pristine" area is unfair. Better access, in both directions, means more choices for residents, who live with unusually poor health conditions, low education and incomes and high dependence on external support. Even more seriously, community governance systems are overwhelmed and seemingly powerless to cope with the difficulties surrounding them on all sides due in large measure to the impact of decisions made elsewhere. When the current population under age 15 in the east and northeast remote communities grow up they will add some 4500 people to the labour force, with little hope of finding a job, and will be followed by an even larger group of young people. A road in itself will not solve these problems, but it will be a small step to open up options and opportunities.

Compared to Bipole III, a road has far greater immediate and long term impact on the ecology of any area through which it passes. For both, a right-of-way must be cleared. But instead of placing towers spaced as needed for a hydro line, a continuous roadbed disrupts the soil/rock/swamp/streams to a far greater extent. Road use and maintenance inhibits natural re-growth, wildlife and their predators have new "routes" to follow and animal impacts with vehicles as well as easy access for hunters, legal or otherwise, increase annual wildlife kills. Ditches lead to soil erosion and stream turbidity. In other words, the impact of a road on the boreal forest is many times greater than a power line.

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Discussion about future options mentioned by the Government includes tourism and mining. What happened to the pristine wilderness? With resolve and attention, mining and tourism investments, carefully sited and designed, can be managed for minimal impact, but so can a power line. If carbon emissions are considered to be a problem, along with carbon sequestering, how does a road help? Forest fires make Canada's boreal forests net contributors of carbon to the atmosphere 5 years out of 15, and on average burn a combined area equal to half the east side every year, so may not be the huge carbon sink some environmentalists would have us believe.

It's also worth noting that the entire boreal area from Lake Winnipeg east to the Ontario border represents only .045% of all Canada's boreal forest, and that the same distance through boreal is required regardless of the route taken. Boreal forest is protected in 4 National Parks already on the World Heritage List, including the 44,800 square kilometre Wood Buffalo National Park, but potential exists for such a site within the East Side justified in part for boreal but also for its representation of traditional lifestyle. The potential for a World Heritage Site remains unaffected with careful site selection for the power line.

Back to the communities: the Manitoba government states that the road benefits the communities, but Bipole III does not. This doesn't have to be the case. Instead of making Manitoba Hydro pay an extra \$450 million or so to take the west side route, why not pay it to the communities that would also benefit from the road? Perhaps this could take the form of an annual or monthly community development "annuity" based on the cost saved by the east route pro-rated against the flow of electrical power. This provides communities with regular revenue dedicated to development, saves in transmission losses, and meets any international argument (i.e. from the United States) that aboriginal people are not fairly treated in energy development. If the communities are interested, they will take the initiative: the government seems to be relying on limited discussions about four years old!

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the western route is not benign in its impacts. The considerable distance the western route takes through the prime and heavily used migratory bird flyway west of Lakes Manitoba and Winnipegosis deserves attention. Some 200 species of waterfowl, subject to international convention, use this flyway and the major staging areas from the Delta Marsh north almost to The Pas. Transmission lines are estimated to kill 130 to 170 billion birds annually in the U.S. alone, and Bipole lines are particularly threatening to large birds. Over the past year, 500 waterfowl deaths in settling ponds in the Fort McMurray area (later revised to 1500 and the subject of a Court decision) attracted international

attention: a line along the west route would represent a continuous and controversial threat.

A new look at Bipole III is warranted. Communities could count on an annual flow of developmental revenue, export sales of electricity would meet higher standards for stewardship and a potential World Heritage site retains strong potential, with no net cost involved. The stewardship factor is even more important today as the Obama administration and the U. S. Congress (and the Bobby Kennedy gang, with whom the Manitoba Government seems to be in thrall) are taking broader consideration of impacts, including greenhouse gasses and offsets, along with compensation for and involvement of aboriginal populations affected.

An east side Bipole III has appeal!

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