

Great Bear rainforest threatened by power project, say critics

Klinaklini project would encroach on nature conservancy

By Scott Simpson, Vancouver Sun April 9, 2010



A Kermode bear goes fishing for a fresh salmon dinner in northern B.C.'s Great Bear rainforest. (Photograph by: Joseph Blake, CNS files)

VANCOUVER — Environmentalists are alarmed that BC Hydro may be considering a \$2.5-billion hydroelectric dam project that would extend almost six kilometres into a nature conservancy in the Great Bear rainforest.

The upper Klinaklini River project is described by one of its proponents, Pristine Power, as a run of river facility with potential generating capacity of 600 megawatts.

The Calgary-based company, in its annual report released this week, says the Kleana project will have “a small environmental footprint.”

However it also says that, “if approved, Kleana will be one of the largest run-of-river, hydroelectric facilities in North America.”

Documents on file with the B.C. Environmental Assessment Office indicate the Kleana dam will be at least 12 metres in height, and will require a reservoir that will extend 5.9 kilometres into Great Bear conservancy on the Upper Klinaklini River.

Migratory fish including salmon and oolichan cannot access the upper river but gather in the lower reaches where another nature conservancy is also situated.

A recent application to the B.C. Integrated Land Management Bureau shows that Kleana Power Corp. has applied to expand its original water license in the area, from 1,176 hectares to 1,642 hectares to encompass an additional project on a Klinaklini tributary immediately downstream of the original project.

The Klinaklini project is one of eight announced last week by BC Hydro as remaining candidates for energy purchase agreements that the Crown corporation is in the process of awarding to independent power producers for new sources of electricity supply.

Run of river projects in B.C. average about 30 megawatts, so the Kleana project is significantly larger.

“There needs to be greater public awareness of the project, the magnitude of the project,” said Vicki Husband of Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “It’s a dam and everything.

“Essentially, the power project will be right in the middle of a conservancy.”

Husband said she believes that the proponents are working with government to adjust the boundaries of the conservancy to allow the project to proceed — and that Hydro may be acting without the benefit of studies that would fully examine the environmental impacts.

“It’s like a balloon. If you look at the Great Bear rainforest and you prick a hole in it, it’s going to have an impact.

“In the Klinaklini you’ve got salmon, you’ve got grizzly populations that depend on the salmon, you’ve got that whole ecosystem that’s very rich. It’s one of the biggest estuaries on the coast. It’s very important to the people of British Columbia and we have been cut out of any kind of planning.”

Pacific Wild spokesman Ian McAllister was shocked.

“The uproar around what’s going on in Bute Inlet and other places, based on what you’re saying, would pale in comparison to this proposal,” McAllister said.

“The Klinaklini is such a significant system, with oolichan, and salmon, and just everything [in the lower reaches], and that whole upper section is completely intact.

“When we were fighting all these battles back in the day to get these places protected we didn’t really think in terms of wind farms, and run of the river and high power transmission lines.”

Proponent Alexander Eunall of Kleana Power said he would not provide specific details on the project while it is under review by BC Hydro, saying it was part of “confidential” negotiations with the utility.

Eunall said the original proposal has been withdrawn from the environmental assessment office — “and that was before we submitted anything to BC Hydro call process.”

He said the company’s subsequent submission to Hydro — which has yet to be reviewed by either the provincial government or the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency — is for “something much more smaller and compact than what was initially investigated.”

He said the project would be outside the conservancy, and would not submit a new application to environmental regulators unless Kleana gets a power purchase agreement.

“We didn’t want to submit anything more into any permitting or public process until we know if BC Hydro is even going to give us anything. We don’t know if it’s even viable from a rates point of view and things like that.”

New Democratic Party energy critic John Horgan said the project does not qualify as the kind of “mom and pop” small hydro project that the provincial government is promoting as a news source of renewable electricity for B.C. — and for export to renewable markets in places such as California.

“You are building to export if you are building to that level of capacity,” Horgan said. “It’s the start of a cascade effect throughout that region which I think is unwanted by the residents.”

B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner could not be reached for comment.

Penner has previously stated in the legislature, under questioning from the Opposition, that small scale run of river projects are permitted in nature conservancies in circumstances where the power would be used to serve needs in the immediate vicinity, such as a first nation in a remote village within a conservancy.

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