

Pollution worries halt Sechelt power project

IPP struggles with a cloudy water problem while critics portray plant's problems as evidence of lax regulation

By SCOTT SIMPSON, Vancouver Sun, May 17, 2010



Renewable Power Corp.'s Gabe Sentlinger measures the flow of the Tzoonie River as part of calibration for a meter installed to measure cloudiness. The company's independent power project has been shut down over fears it is polluting a salmon stream. (Photograph by: Files, Vancouver Sun)

A new \$40 million independent power project on the Sunshine Coast has been shut down for almost four months over fears it is polluting a salmon stream.

Owners of Renewable Power Corp.'s nine-megawatt Tyson Creek run-of-river hydroelectric plant are afraid that problems arising from a silty water source may force them into bankruptcy, while environmentalists are portraying the plant's troubles as evidence of lax government regulation.

The proponents are seeking relief from federal water pollution laws, as applied under the Fisheries Act, while streamkeeper groups suggest a resumption of power generation at Tyson Creek generating facility will harm fish populations downstream in the Tzoonie River.

The Tzoonie is located at the head of Narrows Inlet east of Sechelt peninsula, and supports both spawning and rearing populations of salmon and migratory trout.

For the time being provincial regulators have ordered the facility shut down and it is not clear when, or if, it will be allowed to resume power production.

The facility's problems first came to light in mid-January, shortly after it was commissioned and for the first time began shipping electricity to BC Hydro.

The facility was designed to draw water from the bottom of Tyson Lake, a small, barren alpine lake at 3,000 foot elevation, and pipe it downhill to a generating station in Tyson Creek. The creek flows into Tzoonie River, which is used by salmon.

Within a few weeks of beginning operations, the facility began releasing cloudy water into Tyson Creek — suggesting that a disturbance had taken place under the ice-covered surface of Tyson Lake and caused a large release of silt into the lake. It appears that drawing down the lake for power generation caused the surface ice to scour a delta situated at one end of the lake.

The cloudy, or turbid, water was observed in the Tzoonie River and all the way out to the river's estuary in Narrows Inlet.

A brief test earlier this month indicated that the level of turbidity in the lake remains several times higher than federal pollution thresholds. Silt is not toxic but it can smother fish eggs, make it difficult for young fish to find food and cause physical problems such as fin rot.

“Every time that sheet of ice gets moved up or down, every time that lake level is raised or dropped, there will be more mobilization of sediments.” Daniel Bouman, executive director of the Sunshine Coast Conservation Association, said in an interview. He added that lakes undergo a process called turnover after ice comes off, which could cause further stirring of sediment.

“The value of the fish in the Tzoonie River, both the ones that are in there now as well as its historical capacity, vastly outweighs the value of nine megawatts of electricity. It's vastly more significant, economically, socially and culturally, than that power plant and yet it appears that facility can't operate without polluting the river.”

“They are in a bit of a bind. Either the water is going to still flow, polluted, or they can't operate,” said Powell River-Sunshine Coast MLA Nicholas Simons.

“I think it's a big amber light. The people who proposed this project I think, believe that the government has the appropriate environmental safeguards and they follow every rule that the provincial government makes them follow, and yet this still happened.”

Craig Orr, executive director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society, said the situation “really does underscore that urgent need for better planning, assessment and oversight of renewable energy development in B.C. This is a poster child for that urgent need.”

Marc Soprovich, Renewable Power president, said the company selected the Tyson project because it incorporates a substantial drop in elevation between the lake and the power plant, providing consistent water velocity or “head” that supports premium-quality electricity production for BC Hydro.

Renewable Power is hoping to demonstrate that the project is not a threat to fish, on the premise that turbidity will fall back within allowable limits once the Tyson water is diluted as it mixes with the Tzoonie.

That argument is not unprecedented — Metro Vancouver's regional sewage district uses the same premise to release partly treated sewage into the Fraser River.

Renewable Power has set up water quality monitoring stations on Tyson Creek and the Tzoonie and hopes to collect enough data to persuade the province to allow operations to resume.

“We are a very small company, so it's a very serious situation,” Soprovich said. The company has one other generating facility and its proposal for another cluster of five run-of-river projects in the same area was recently awarded a power sales agreement by BC Hydro.

"We are in a whole bunch of people's crosshairs and for anybody who wants to shut us down this is a perfect opportunity," Soprovich said.

"We just started up in December. We haven't really made a lot of cash flow from this plant yet and so we don't have a lot of resources that would allow us to stand back [and wait for the silt to clear on its own].

"The ministry has dictated that we have to be below the guideline everywhere. That's impossible. We are trying to sort this out but we are dealing with a guideline that doesn't work in this situation.

"This could be the first bankrupt project in B.C. and it's all because of a guideline that doesn't work. We're hoping that common sense will prevail."

ssimpson@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun
