

Ken Bradley: The damage wrought by Manitoba Hydro

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Last Monday, Manitoba Hydro purchased a full-page advertisement headlined "Time For Some Facts About Manitoba Hydro." This was an attempt by Manitoba Hydro to influence today's meeting of the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission, which is set to make the single largest resource decision of recent history: a 10-year, \$1 billion contract between Xcel Energy and Manitoba Hydro. Such a contract would have long-term impact on the environmental and socioeconomic conditions for the environment and lives of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation of Manitoba.

Manitoba Hydro says that its energy is "clean," that impacts from its projects have stabilized, and that Manitoba Hydro has "fairly and respectfully" dealt with the Pimicikamak Cree claims. To the contrary: Environmental and cultural destruction related to the project continues today, 25 years after the Cree nations reached an agreement with Hydro, and Hydro characterizes these realities as hallmarks of clean energy.

The environmental damage and socioeconomic consequences associated with Manitoba Hydro's large-scale dam projects have been largely ignored. Manitoba Hydro reengineered the two largest rivers in the province of Manitoba. The Churchill's flow has been reduced by 85 percent to divert water to feed the Nelson River's thirsty generating stations. The result has been massive flooding of over 1,000 square miles of land, which caused erosion to thousands of miles of shoreline and left waterways and shoreline scattered with forest debris. The water is so thick with rotting organic matter and sediment that your hand disappears from view if you hold it just inches below the surface.

Aboriginal communities have been seriously affected by this damage. They have traditionally depended on the river for food and income. The Pimicikamak Cree Nation now suffers from more than 85 percent unemployment and suicide rates more than 10 times the Canadian national average.

U.S. consumers purchase approximately 40 percent of Manitoba Hydro's power, and those dollars help secure financing for future projects. Manitoba Hydro has several projects it is itching to build. During my last trip two weeks ago, Pimicikamak Elder Nick Halcrow showed our group Bladder Falls, a possible future dam site. We asked him what he would do if Manitoba Hydro built a dam at this location. He replied, "I will just give up."

I want to be assured, as a consumer, that any power purchased from Manitoba Hydro does not lead to future destruction of Manitoba's wilderness.

The Utilities Commission fortunately has a means to examine the impacts caused by such massive efforts at ecological and social reengineering. It is required by law to fully and carefully consider all environmental and socioeconomic costs associated with its decision

to approve or reject the contract between Xcel Energy and Manitoba Hydro. It must consider these factors in the same manner it examines any other resource decision, such as for a new coal plant or additional storage for nuclear waste at Prairie Island.

The Pimicikamak Cree Nation has asked the commission for a "contested case hearing" to develop a complete factual record as the basis for the decision. Manitoba Hydro's ad only confirms the need for such a hearing.