

## Run-of-river power projects concealed by a green curtain

**Craig Orr**

Special to the Sun

*Thursday, January 03, 2008*

'Green' run-of-river hydro projects, also called IPPs (for independent power projects), produce minimal greenhouse gases.

And, unlike B.C.'s Bennett-era mega-hydro projects spanning the Peace and Columbia rivers, they do not require gigantic dams, reservoirs or flooding to generate power.

So why not embrace wholesale development of these projects on B.C.'s streams and rivers, earn climate change credit, and please both environmentally conscious voters and business folk alike?

As usual, the devil is in the untold details. Before 2006, there were only 25 operational run-of-river projects. By August 2006, a further 41 run-of-river projects had acquired Electricity Purchase Agreements from BC Hydro. Scarcely a year later, some 348 active applications for water licences were pending.

This mad scramble of planning, investment and development, likened by many observers to a gold rush, has been based on the unexamined assumption that run-of-river hydro projects are benign to the environment -- or at least more benign than other sources of power generation.

Run-of-river hydro projects -- often referred to as "green hydro" by government and industry -- divert water into a pipe (often several kilometres in length) and then into a turbine before returning it to the same watercourse downstream. If planned carefully and responsibly, many British Columbians believe, such projects have a rightful place in B.C.'s energy future.

But how green is this future if hundreds of run-of-river projects -- many actually large-scale industrial developments -- are allowed to be built in areas with high recreational, cultural, or wilderness values? How does government planning and approval ensure that "green hydro" is truly green?

To answer such questions, Watershed Watch examined the regulatory process that guides project approval and purportedly protects environmental, social and cultural values. This is a snapshot of what we found:

- The impact of projects, including extensive road-building and construction infrastructure, can in fact be excessive, especially in areas where clusters of projects are proposed, such as around Pitt Lake, Harrison Lake and the Whistler-Squamish corridor.
- B.C. refuses to consider a planning process that would measure or manage the cumulative impacts of these projects, or that would ensure development spares sensitive areas with high environmental, cultural and social values.
- No legislation exists to reliably assess and protect wildlife such as bears and elk.

- BC Hydro does not work with permitting agencies (e.g., Fisheries and Oceans Canada, B.C.'s Ministry of Environment) during project development to ensure that the total project footprint is minimized.

- IPPs producing less than 50 megawatts (sufficient power for 27,500 homes) are exempt from the environmental assessment process; many projects are thus designed to fall just under this threshold to avoid "undue" regulatory constraint.

- Local communities and municipalities have no real say in the approvals process; no rules for consultation (e.g., providing timely information for comment) with the public exist.

Indeed, the government has shown increasing impatience relative to public desire for proper consultation. In a July 2007 interview, Environment Minister Barry Penner stated, "I don't object to criticism. But I prefer informed criticism," suggesting that anyone who has done their homework cannot possibly be opposed (Penner blasts run-of-the-river critics -- Shayne Morrow, Alberni Valley Times.)

With no less arrogance, the provincial government proclaimed Bill 30 in June 2006 to silence loud local government and public opposition to Ledcor's proposed \$87-million power project on the Ashlu River near Squamish. By abolishing local zoning authority, the government ensured that no one -- regardless of how "informed" they are -- could say no to a run-of-river power project, ever.

In terms of the diversity and splendour of our natural resources, British Columbians are truly blessed. But like any prudent investor, we have an obligation to use and conserve those resources wisely, so that future generations aren't impoverished by our greed and lack of foresight. To learn more about how the development of run-of-river hydro power might be done in a sustainable manner, and to add your voice to those who are asking government to do its own homework, please visit [www.watershed-watch.org](http://www.watershed-watch.org).

Craig Orr is the executive director of the Watershed Watch Salmon Society.

© The Vancouver Sun 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.