

Grassy Mountain Coal Project: Joint Review Panel

For Our Children: A Submission by the Eco-Elders

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the review of the proposed Grassy Mountain Coal Project located on the ancestral lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy. The Eco-Elders are a group of Albertans concerned about the environmental quality we leave for *future generations*. Today we represent their interests, those who have no voice in this development but will be greatly impacted by it. We are elders, parents, grandparents, *and* representatives of a generation that has contributed to the environmental stressors and destruction which will detrimentally impact *future generations*. We recognize that the short term decision making of our generation has not allowed us to be good ancestors, protecting our grandchildren's legacy for the future. We come with hope that this environmental assessment will focus on the future for all Albertans rather than the short-term financial benefits for the few.

We recognize the value the Grassy Mountain Coal project offers in terms of immediate jobs and incomes for the current generation in local communities. But what does it offer for the longer term and to *future generations*? As Albertans we all must aspire to be proud and ethical stewards of these lands entrusted to us.

The land surrounding this project holds magnificent landscapes supporting varied ecosystems – a bounty of wild species and pure headwaters, clean air, fresh winds, and a balance of rain fall and sunshine supporting an active rangeland and grasslands to the east. The proposed project will negatively impact these valuable ecosystems in the near term, and cause significantly adverse environmental effects well into the future. Our grandchildren's health, livelihoods and ability to thrive on this land will be diminished because of this project. **We request you do not recommend approval of the Grassy Mountain Coal Project**

The Impact of the Proposed Coal Project

1- On our Environment

First, the mine proposal represents multiple and direct assaults on our environment. Open-pit mining is by definition a permanent and extreme change to the landscape; while it may be rehabilitated it cannot be restored. The mountain is gone and a forest will struggle to regenerate, especially if rehabilitation is poorly done. Our forests are already under stress from climate change and need to be preserved wherever possible. The loss of these environmental resources limits future options for our grandchildren's generation and beyond.

Second, water is the source of life for all ecosystems and, whether we acknowledge it or not, we are part of the ecosystem and, along with the other species, rely on its health. The rivers of the eastern slope are headwaters that support a large irrigation sector to the east as well as water for the related communities. With melting glaciers from climate change our overall water supply will be reduced, and pollution from the mining operation will further reduce the potability of that supply. Protecting the water supply for future generations is critical. The exposure of mined coal and rock to the atmosphere releases selenium which washes into rivers polluting the waters. Our neighbours in Elk Valley, BC have seen water treatment facilities built to try and lessen the selenium in their rivers, yet the counts of cutthroat trout are still down according to Teck Coal's monitoring from last year.¹

The river ecosystem will be addressed in Timberwolf Wilderness Society, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the Oldman Watershed Council submissions, to whom we lend our full support.

Third, coal is the worst of fossil fuels in terms of impacts to the atmosphere, especially in relation to climate change. Exposed coal releases methane into the atmosphere which affects planet health. Methane is known to be 84 times more destructive than carbon dioxide over a twenty year period.² Our provincial and federal governments have commitments to reduce our carbon footprint. With this project not only will we be releasing emissions at the plant we will also be allowing other countries to burn this coal, where their populations will suffer as well as the global atmosphere. We cannot espouse such an immoral position and close our eyes to what will continue to happen to our fellow human beings and our atmosphere.

The Timberwolf Wilderness Society will be providing expert witness regarding this aspect and has our full support of their position.

How will we be able to stand with integrity before our grandchildren and admit that we chose to ignore what we knew rather than have the courage and creativity to envision a different future?

2. On our health

We have long known that coal mining is dangerous to human health. Some of us have lost grandparents because of coal dust over a life of working in the mines. With underground mining the poisons are somewhat contained, however surface mining does not have that containment. Many international studies have looked at surface coal mining and the health of local communities:

Published in the journal Ecopsychology, 2012 a paper from Radford University, Virginia summarizes not only the physical environmental damages and physical illnesses associated with surface mining but draws attention to the devastating toll this has on mental health from

traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, drug abuse and depression in populations near the mining. This paper should be read as a cautionary tale.³

-A 2015 article for The Extractive Industries & Society, author Michael Hendryx with the School for Public Health at Indiana University, concluded that “epidemiological data demonstrate that populations in mining communities have poor health...” and “the weight of the evidence reinforces previous science-based calls to discontinue mountaintop removal mining due to its environmental and public health risks.”⁴

- 2016 research out of Georgia State University regarding surface mining found that in the areas where this mining exists there is a 40% greater chance of people living with major depressions and mental health issues that “pose enormous challenges to the affected coal communities and will linger for decades.”⁵

- In 2018 the BMC Public Health Journal, out of Australia, published a systematic review of epidemiological studies concluding that reduced health-related quality of life, increased perceptions of detrimental health conditions, and higher frequency of medical consultations existed in the communities resident or in proximity of coal mining.⁶

Why, given the evidence we have from other jurisdictions, would we think that our situation would be different.

- We are aware that COVID19 has exposed the degree of air pollution we all suffer from. Images taken of cities and regions before and during COVID show dramatic reduction in air pollution with decreased industrial activity. Doctors are also reporting reduced asthma and similar problems. Coal is one of the worst contributors to air pollution and respiratory health.

Our present grandchildren are living COVID19 and know changes must be made to create a healthier environment for their future. Will we help them in this aspiration?

These health concerns are being ably presented by the Livingstone Landowners Group and their position has full support from our members.

When our grandchildren ask us why we could not have made a different choice and thereby protect their health – what will we say?

3. On our Present Economy

Alberta’s current economic problems are the result of a singular, long-term, reliance on fossil fuels. We recognize the economic and employment opportunities this coal mine may present, in the short term, to the local economy, and we can understand the attraction for Crowsnest

Pass communities who need a boost to their economy and want to believe the promises. However, it must be recognized that a short term benefit needs to be balanced against the multiple pressures already on the earth and its atmosphere. Are the 20 years during which this mine is expected to be profitable and extracting from Canada worth the hundreds of years of devastation that will be wreaked upon our *future generations*? We expect our governments to think beyond fossil fuels and support sustainable economies for these and all communities.

Importantly, the assumption of a future market for this coal is questionable. Climate change is driving a search for alternatives to the fossil fuels. Financial markets are increasingly reluctant to invest in or insure fossil fuel projects. Technology is changing fast; with recent developments in Germany and Sweden it is expected that hydrogen is the future for steel production, not coal.⁷

This proposed development indicates it will continue to almost 2050, when climate experts and the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* say we need to have moved substantially beyond fossil fuels if we hope to preserve a reasonable living environment for *future generations*.

Many believe that coal mining will improve our economy with increased revenue and jobs. However, statistics from 2017 show that revenue from the Tourism sector towers over coal royalties, and the Tourism sector employs 9 times more people than those working in mining, quarrying and their support activities for that year.^{8, 9, 10} If coal mining were to even double in value, it would still provide only a fraction of the economic benefit from Tourism.

Why would we Albertans want to destroy our landscapes, create pollution and threaten one of our most profitable industries?

4. On our Future Financial Burdens

The financial legacy of the project is likely to be negative. Extraction industries have a well-established record of walking away from their responsibilities once the money stops flowing.¹¹ If hydrogen is the future of steel production, this does not bode well for Riversdale maintaining a profitable mining operation for the longer term. And of note, the proponent is a subsidiary of another organization; this type of structure enables companies to avoid future responsibilities by limiting their exposure.

Our province is already struggling with billions of dollars in environmental liabilities from orphan wells. This project could add an additional financial burden on future generations. *Do we really want to add to the financial liability we are already passing to future generations?*

Government taxes from mining industries are considered the lowest of any industry and are often allowed to be deferred by governments when they accrue during boom years.¹² Once the

mining company has left, especially if they are foreign, these tax liabilities remain on the books. Also, our provincial government has recently frozen or reduced royalties for fossil fuel companies.¹³

So what are our grandchildren really to gain from the Grassy Mountain Coal project except destroyed ecosystems, sick communities and financial liability?

An Alternative Vision for Alberta - Finding Nature's Solutions

Protecting our ecosystems and landscapes is the best way to ground a positive vision for our future. To get us to a stable climate 'nature solutions' need to be included. These are the most cost effective way to reach our climate targets and ensure a healthy future for all. A study published by the National Academy of Sciences entitled Natural Climate Solutions states that keeping our ecosystems intact absorbs up to 25% of our greenhouse gas emissions, and improving the land management of our ecosystems can provide an equivalent of 37% of our climate mitigation, enabling us to attain our 2030 goal, and 20% of our 2050 goal in reducing GHG emissions¹⁴. Not only are intact ecosystems a carbon sink; they also protect us against storms, flooding, winds, and erosion that we are seeing more of.¹⁵ Healthy ecosystems also provide a buffer between wildlife and humans, guarding against virus transmissions.¹⁶ COVID19 is an example of transmission from animals to humans. We are told that we will have to deal with future pandemics if we do not address planet health.

Is this the future we are willing to endorse for our grandchildren?

Given what we know about how to protect our environment, our health and our future, the destruction of these landscapes, mountain tops, and ecosystems is lunacy. Instead of promoting the destruction of these lands we feel strongly that the government must support and encourage Albertans to maintain, protect and reclaim their lands. For example:

There are projects, people and organizations already supporting and encouraging Alberta landowners to rehabilitate and maintain their grasslands and to recognize the ability of the land to hold carbon. Pilot projects are quantifying the ability of restored grass ecosystems to hold carbon. If these lands are valued properly then they will be saved from further degradation.¹⁷

There are agricultural solutions that restore the soil and lands rather than depleting them. An Alberta organization Rural Routes to Climate Solutions is providing education to farming communities to become part of the solution toward the health of our ecosystems.¹⁸

There are orphan well sites being reclaimed as locations for solar arrays.¹⁹

Hydrogen will be a resource of the future and in Alberta, with our carbon resources, the production of ‘blue hydrogen’ is a distinct possibility with significant economic benefit.^{20, 21} And, more importantly, Alberta’s abundant solar and wind resources can be used to produce ‘green hydrogen’.

With government support, a move toward the restoration of our ecosystems could create many green economy jobs; where we actively change our practice of taking from the land to a vision of living with the land. We need government policies to support these creative Albertans who can guide us to a future which both preserves our environment and builds our economy.

When our grandchildren ask us how we helped, will we be able to talk of our support OR do we admit to having allowed the deterioration of the land to happen? Why promote the dirtiest of fuels when alternative technologies and healthy jobs are there to be grasped?

Conclusion

If this project is approved, it is very likely the first of many coal mines. The proponent owns other coal leases, and other companies have expressed interest. The adverse effects outlined above will simply worsen with each additional mine. And the environmental impacts will be added to the many we already live with.

Instead of looking 7 generations into future when making decisions, as our Indigenous neighbours espouse, and various countries are now including in their policies,²² this project will turn back the clock to rely on an old industry. It is an industry that already “died” once, and will die again, an unsustainable cycle of boom and bust, leaving the region in a greater state of poverty because the environment will be destroyed. Then what?

We must be the good ancestors that future generations will look back to.

It is time to re-imagine Alberta’s future. We must take bold steps offering hope and opportunity to our grandchildren. Stepping back to the 20th century coal era is not the way forward. We need to acknowledge the damage of past generations, limit the damage done by our current generation, and create a sustainable economy for the future.

This will require enlightened vision, investment and courage from our political leaders. As Christina Figueres, Costa Rican diplomat and former UN Secretary for Climate Change has noted “The Anthropocene... does not need to go down in history as the age characterized by human-induced destruction. It can be the time when we rewrite our expected future for a better one: we still hold the pen. We must conceive of success and take immediate steps towards it.”

Across the world and in our own country, the legacies of people once considered great are being challenged. *What do we want our legacy to be? What kind of ancestors will we choose be?* When *future generations* look back will they ask:

"What did Grandad do as the climate deteriorated and pollution rose? He knew what was happening, and he knew why. Then why did he not do something about it?"

OR

"Grandpa and Grandma knew and they made the decision to change their life, and look for cleaner ways to get their energy; protecting our environments and providing the opportunities we have today."

This group of elders asks you to make a decision for that distant future. We would like our grandchildren's children to read about 2020 as the year when we said NO to any new, expanded coal or fossil fuel projects. They are inconsistent with the life giving legacy we must bequeath to *future generations*. Therefore, **we ask you to not recommend approval of this project.** Thank you.

Endnotes

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