

B.C. FIRST NATIONS HAVE CLEANER, CHEAPER SUBSTITUTE FOR SITE C HYDRO

Written by Joan Russow

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British Columbia's First Nations have a plan ready to make up the 1,100 megawatts of generating capacity that may be withdrawn from the province's forecast supply if the Green and New Democratic Parties succeed in taking office and, as promised, refer the contentious Site C hydro project for review by the BC Utilities Commission, leading to its cancellation.

The plan, drafted with First Nations input by Clean Energy BC back in 2014, may need a bit of updating to reflect the plummeting cost of renewable generation. But even back then, said Executive Director Paul Kariya, "we told the B.C. government we think we can do it cheaper."

"We put together a portfolio of renewable projects, including small hydro and the possibility of some small natural gas peakers," Kariya said. The up-front cost was lower than Site C's projected \$8 billion, in part because the capacity can be built incrementally. "You can build according to whatever the needs are, and the private sector would take the risk."

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But BC Hydro, and the B.C. Liberal government, as North American Energy News reports, tossed aside the independent power producers' scenario and opted for the dam. Occupant evictions and land clearing [have already begun](#) for what would be the third large dam on the Peace River. Previous barriers did profound damage to wetlands at the Peace-Athabasca Delta, downstream in northern Alberta.

“The B.C. government was very aware of how much interest there is by First Nations to produce electricity for the grid,” said Chief Patrick Michell of the Kanaka Bar Indian Band, one of the First Nations originally surveyed by Clean Energy BC, the First Nations Clean Energy Working Group, and the University of Victoria. “And they still made the decision to proceed with Site C, knowing they would be stopping development of many smaller projects and denying economic development opportunities for First Nations.”

In what may be a related development now, the Crown utility's power trading arm, Powerex, recently advised regulators in California that it will be joining the Western Energy Imbalance wholesale power market, run by the state grid operator, as of next April. Powerex “will be the [first international participant](#) in the market,” Utility Dive notes. The step indicates that BC Hydro expects to have spare power to sell—bolstering charges that the generation from Site C [won't be required](#) for decades.

Meanwhile, with the political winds changing in Victoria, B.C. First Nations are gearing up for a second shot at offering an alternative to Site C.

Citing survey responses from 105 of 203 First Nations in the province, the researchers said 47% were already “involved in the clean energy industry in some way, from ownership to receiving royalties.” Their communities are participants in 78 operating clean energy projects and have 49 more under development, plus another 249 on their wish lists.

That represents more than \$35 million invested so far, co-author Judith Sayers observed in a news release. Projects in planning could bring that to about \$3.4 billion. “This is a significant investment potential for B.C. that the B.C. government is ignoring,” Sayers said.

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James Redford, director of lands and resources for Quatsino First Nation, agreed. “98% of responding Nations are eager for more development in this area,” he said. And pointedly, some 60% of bands reported to researchers that the biggest hurdle to proceeding with those clean investments was created when “BC Hydro stopped acquiring power from independent producers, because of the projected power surplus from the Site C dam beginning in 2024.”

“Sending Site C to the Review Commission gives hope to First Nations that there is a possibility the project could be shut down,” Sayers said. “The question is what will the Review Commission say, and how will it be used by the NDP/Greens. I know they will do the right thing.”