

Written by Joan Russow
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First Nations ready to set up blockades if Site C dam approved

By [Matt Preprost](#) / Dawson Creek Daily News

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First Nations in northeastern B.C. repeated a familiar story to the Site C Joint Review Panel on Tuesday, saying they are being backed into a corner, and warning that they are ready to set up blockades if the hydroelectric dam is approved.

Public hearings in aboriginal communities over B.C. Hydro's \$7.9-billion proposal concluded in Halfway River First Nation, where band members and elders said they're united "shoulder to shoulder" to stop the flooding of the Peace River valley.

"If they're going to build the dam, let's go and blockade it," elder Maisie Metecheah said in her presentation to the panel. "I'm not afraid. I don't care if I go to jail. This is my land. I'm going to save my land."

Hydro is seeking to build a 60-metre earth dam and 1,100-megawatt generating station seven kilometres southwest from downtown Fort St. John. The dam would create a reservoir that would flood 83 kilometres of the Peace River and 14 kilometres of the Halfway River.

Site C would host the third dam on the Peace, and add 10 per cent of electrical capacity to the provincial energy grid, which Hydro says is needed to meet a forecast 40 per cent spike in demand over the next 20 years.

Since hearings began in December, Treaty 8 members have laid bare their frustrations at seeing their traditional hunting, gathering and spiritual lands being bulldozed by industrial interests.

"This is a new era in Indian Country," said Halfway band member Gerry Hunter. "You can only push people so far before something is going to happen."

Halfway River Chief Darlene Hunter called the Peace River the "heartland" of Treaty 8 territory, which stretches across 840,000 square kilometres across B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories.

Members describe the area as being rich in moose and caribou, berries and medicinal plants, but say those are quickly being choked out and poisoned by oil, gas and logging operations in the region, and are at risk of being lost forever.

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"[Our members] are surrounded by industrial development where they can no longer meaningfully practice their treaty rights," Hunter said. "The Peace River valley is, in many ways, our last refuge. We cannot allow the past infringement of our rights to be swept under the rug while this dam adds another blow to our rights and our livelihood."

Band members played a 20-minute video for the panel following aboriginals on a traditional hunt, harvesting and butchering a moose, drying its meat, and scraping the fur off of a hide. Later, one youth, Tyron Achla, told the panel that, at 12, he has already killed a moose, three deer, an elk and countless chicken and rabbits while learning to hunt for his family.

"We never give up on how our ancestors survived, and are teaching our generations in the bush, how to boil the mint, how to skin moose," Maisie Metecheah said.

"The outdoors is school," added one youth.

Hydro says it's been given a mandate from the province to negotiate with First Nations to mitigate and compensate for the impacts Site C is anticipated to have.

Hydro has been in negotiations with Treaty 8 nations since 2007, and says it is willing to mitigate the impacts of the project on First Nations through fish and wildlife habitat projects, Crown land transfers, the creation of a database of rare plants, monitoring of mercury levels in fish stocks and education and employment opportunities. Hydro has also committed itself to future negotiations.

But money isn't of interest to Halfway members.

Member Katie Metecheah says aboriginals are being "bombarded by everybody at the same time," and are coined "radical" when they stand up in opposition to defend a right to a land that is becoming more and more limited.

"We don't want to be radical, but when push comes to shove, we're going to have to stand for ourselves, for our people, and our community," she said. "We have no control over our land anymore. I can feel the helplessness."

Allisun Rana, lawyer for the Treaty 8 Tribal Association, says First Nations are facing a lonely battle to protect century-old treaty rights, and says many members feel that Site C has already been approved.

The B.C. government has repeatedly stated its desire for the project, and has even removed the B.C. Utilities Commission from playing an oversight role, Rana noted, while the Federal government has declined to participate in a consultation over the project, and in the public hearing process, saying the dam doesn't affect reserve lands and the province assumes jurisdiction over land and resources.

"It's going to have a profound effect when the federal government makes a decision on whether or not to approve this project," said Rana. "They have to consult, they know they do,

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and they've said that they are, but the only face of the federal government that First Nations have seen has been the environmental assessment panel.

"If that's the vehicle the federal government is using to consult, that's very limited. I can't see where in this process they're going to have a really open and full dialogue with First Nations," she said.

West Moberly band chief Roland Willson claims the Federal government has been absent in the past when First Nations have tried to address dwindling wildlife and and growing environmental concerns in the region.

He said there's a disconnect between governments when it comes to managing impacts on treaty rights, and argued that First Nations are left to defend themselves with inadequate funding, handed out by project proponents, to respond to tens of thousands of pages of documents.

"They give you enough to participate, but not enough to fight," he said.

Outside of that, the chief said, First Nations would bring the fight to the government no matter how unwilling the latter is to cooperate.

"They're not going to rush forward. We're eventually going to have to drag them in, and there are ways of dragging them in," he said. "If the treaties won't bring them here, we'll bring them in with something else."

Harry Swain, chair of the Joint Review Panel, reiterated the role of the independent panel is to gather information on the dam's impact on asserted or established treaty rights, and make recommendations to mitigate or avoid those effects.

He told the audience members that the panel can't make any determination on the scope or strength of aboriginal treaty rights, and can't make a determination on whether the Crown has met its duty to consult with First Nations, he said.

Meanwhile, other band members raised concerns at Tuesday's hearing over the construction of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam outside Hudson's Hope in the 1960s, and questioned whether a major sinkhole discovered in the dam in the 1990s could happen with Site C.

Band member Paul Courtoreille said he worked on the construction of the Bennett Dam when he was younger, along with several other dams Hydro built on the Canoe River and Arrow Lakes. When building Bennett, Courtoreille says, Hydro took shortcuts and only cleared the perimeter of the reservoir crest, leaving the stands of pine, spruce and poplar lining the banks of the river as the reservoir filled up.

It's a decision Hydro is still paying for today, with regular cleanup of debris, and growing concerns about rising mercury levels in fish stocks in the lake caused by decaying trees now in the middle and at the bottom of the reservoir, Courtoreille said.

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"They call it progress, we call it destruction," he said. "I'm ashamed because I was part of it."

Susan Yurkovich, Hydro's executive vice-president overseeing the Site C project, said the utility has learned much since building W.A.C. Bennett.

"For the Site C project, we have a very robust clearing plan," she said.

That includes clearing all merchantable timber, along with clearing up to erosion lines to prevent trees from sloughing into the river, Yurkovich said. Hydro will also manage any debris in the reservoir.

When proposing mitigation measures, Hydro looks to regulators, she added, as well as to existing programs that have been implemented and proven to work.

"If we have uncertainty, we propose monitoring programs to make sure we understand what the effect is going forward," she said.

The Joint Review Panel will issue a report of its findings by spring to both Victoria and Ottawa, which can choose to accept or reject the panel's recommendations on the project. A final decision is expected by the summer. If approved, the dam is expected to become operational by 2025.

Gerry Hunter says First Nations will be together when a decision is made.

"People will stand for Mother Nature, people will stand for the environment, and people will stand for the river," he said.

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