

## River power plans need full review

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The government was right to pull the plug on a controversial power project that would have required the diversion of eight streams and a 4.6-kilometre power line through a provincial park.

Environment Minister Barry Penner short-circuited the review process after ferocious opposition from Lower Mainland residents opposed to the project on the Upper Pitt River east of Vancouver. He announced this week that no matter what the outcome, he wouldn't approve land being taken from the park.

It's the right decision. But the company is also rightly concerned about the intervention, which comes before the reviews on the run-of-river power project have been completed and after it has spent about \$1 million.

The controversy -- along with other concerns -- suggest that this is an appropriate time for an external review of the rapid increase in run-of-river power projects in the province. There are environmental issues, concerns about the impact on future energy prices and questions about whether taxpayers are getting fair value for the water rights involved.

The government has been encouraging the projects for about five years. It sees the relatively small hydro projects as a green way to meet increasing energy demands. Companies pay for the right to divert streams and rivers through turbines. The rivers aren't dammed, although weirs may be used to manage the flow.

The approach makes good sense. Power can be produced close to where it is needed, without producing greenhouse gases.

But the footprint of many projects has been larger and more disruptive than expected. Rather than small structures in streams, there have been pipelines, roads, powerhouses and transmission lines.

Some have been planned for wilderness rivers, creating fears of lost tourism revenue. And critics worry that once the companies complete their initial 20-year contracts with B.C. Hydro, they will demand much higher rates or simply sell the power into the U.S.

Companies have bought more than 500 water licences on rivers and streams in the province in the last five years. Many of those will never be built, but more than 80 have been completed or are in the works.

The decision to rely on private companies, rather than B.C. Hydro, makes sense. But it also means that increased oversight is needed to make sure taxpayers and Hydro customers are getting a fair deal.

Run-of-river power remains a good option, especially given alternatives like gas-powered plants. And some of the opposition has been the usual nimbyism from people who would like others to bear the burden of producing the power that they use.

But Penner's intervention shows that questions remain about the rush to develop this public

resource. An independent review -- perhaps by the auditor general -- would provide a useful check on the entire initiative.

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