

Site C dam's sustainability on top of BC NDP's agenda



The Site C Dam location is seen along the Peace River in Fort St. John, B.C., Tuesday, April 18, 2017.

JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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3 DAYS AGO

The B.C. government needs to think about its long-term commitment to tackling climate change when it makes a decision in the coming weeks on the fate of the Site C hydroelectric dam, some of the province's leading energy experts will advise when they brief the cabinet later this week.

Six advisers have been invited to an unusual cabinet meeting on Thursday to help Premier John Horgan and his ministers decide whether to kill or continue with the \$10-billion project on the Peace River in northeastern British Columbia.

Both energy lawyer David Austin and consultant Robert McCullough will strongly advocate that the NDP government terminate construction, even at a loss of \$4-billion, saying the alternatives will still be cheaper.

However, at least half of the panel members are expected to make the case that the clean energy from the dam could be used to help transition to a low-carbon future.

Whether that energy is best produced by Site C, or some other new source, may still be in contention by the time the briefing is over.

The cabinet is meeting every day this week to wrestle with the decision, which is due before the end of the year.

Colleen Giroux-Schmidt, a senior director for Innergex Renewable Energy Inc., said on Monday that she won't recommend one way or the other if the dam should be completed. She will tell cabinet, however, that B.C. will need far more clean energy than the government's independent regulator calculated when it studied the Site C dam.

"Irrespective of what they decide on Site C, we are going to need a lot more electricity in the province and the country if we are going to meet the commitments that were made at Paris," she said in an interview.

Energy economist Mark Jaccard, a professor of Sustainable Energy at Simon Fraser University, says B.C. will be able to use the electricity if the dam is built. However, he is not advocating for completion.

"Let me be clear. We do not need Site C. There are many ways to produce all of the electricity we need," he said.

However, Prof. Jaccard added, the government should be banking on a significant increase in demand for electricity if it intends to meet its own targets to curb GHG emissions from transportation and buildings.

British Columbia is expected to miss its 2020 targets for GHG reductions and is currently working on a new plan to get back on track by the year 2030.

"If we achieve our federal, provincial and city targets for greenhouse gas reduction and renewable energy, the output of Site C – or other renewables – will be needed soon after [the dam's] expected date of completion," he said.

Mr. Austin, who represents the Independent Power Producers, has been described by Premier Horgan as "one of the sharpest minds on energy policy in B.C."

Mr. Austin will tell cabinet that completing the project is not the best way to produce clean energy. The NDP government sent the project, which is already \$2-billion into construction, to a review of the B.C. Utilities Commission and Mr. Austin said that independent review demonstrates that the project, even this far along, is destined to be a white elephant because of the cheap renewable-power alternatives that are available.

"On the basis of the BCUC final report, the project should not proceed," he said. "In terms of public acceptability, climate action has to be done as cheaply as possible."

Perhaps the strongest voice on the panel defending Site C will be consultant David Craig, who will be speaking to the one issue that Premier Horgan said will decide the fate of the project – the impact on ratepayers.

Mr. Craig said he is not advocating for Site C, but he says ratepayers have the most to lose if the government cancels the project now. When the remediation costs are factored in, cancelling Site C will cost an estimated \$4-billion.

"The scenario for completing Site C would have a near zero impact on ratepayers ... Cancellation would represent a 10[-per-cent to] 12-per-cent rate increase over 10 years," he said. "It's difficult for ratepayers to understand why one would want to cancel it."

Mr. Craig said the province still needs to map out how it intends to rein in GHG emissions, but clean electricity will be part of the solution.

"We are likely going to need energy from all of the sources that we have available to us."

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