

U.S. dam threatens 'rare' B.C. Wash. state plan would ruin 'third-most-endangered ecosystem in Canada'

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The Province

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

A proposed dam in Washington state could flood up to 7,200 hectares of land on B.C.'s side of the Canada-U.S. border, threatening species in one of Canada's most ecologically diverse areas.

If built to its maximum height of 80 metres, the Shankers Bend Dam, eight kilometres west of Oroville, Wash., would flood B.C. parkland, an Indian reserve and a proposed national park along the banks of the Similkameen River.

B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner is so worried, he fired off a letter yesterday to his Washington state counterpart, demanding answers to five points.



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Barry Penner is raising serious questions about plans for a major dam in Washington state.

"It's a tragedy of the highest proportions if it proceeds," said Chloe O'Loughlin, executive director of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

"This is the third-most-endangered ecosystem in Canada.

"Both the federal and provincial governments right now are considering it being given the highest protection in Canada in the form of a national park.

"It [the dam] would break the [Canadian] Species at Risk Act, the [B.C.] Park Act . . . and they haven't consulted the First Nations at all."

If the Lower Similkameen area was declared a national park, O'Loughlin said, it would strengthen her society's argument to abandon the high-dam proposal in favour of a project that would not involve any flooding in B.C.

"There are 37 endangered species there," said O'Loughlin, citing rare owls, woodpeckers, butterflies, badgers, salamanders, toads, fish and snakes. "It's really important dry grassland," she said, describing fragile, desert-like soil and a habitat for migrating birds.

"What they were thinking about, I don't know," said O'Loughlin. "We need to intervene on that."

So far, her society is the only Canadian interest group to be granted intervenor

status in the approval process before the U.S. regulator, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. It would be at least eight years before any dam could be built at Shankers Bend.

Penner's letter to Jay Manning, director of Washington's Department of Ecology, follows the state's recent decision to grant the Okanogan County Public Utility District No. 1 \$300,000 to study three dam proposals.

"It's too soon to press the panic button," said Penner. "But it's certainly something that we're going to watch closely. They need to be talking to [Canadian] First Nations, local governments and us."

The idea of damming the Similkameen and flooding the valley north of the 49th parallel has been around since the 1920s, Penner said.

"It's a very distinctive part of British Columbia," said Penner, an avid outdoorsman. "That area has its own ecology and it's very special in its own right."

International-water disputes are usually settled by the International Joint Commission, which has Canadian and American representatives, an IJC spokesman said.

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