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East-side proponents understand cost

In "Focus On Real Bipole III Issues," (March 28), Errol Black and Lynne Fernandez try to defend the NDP government's meddling in the affairs of Manitoba Hydro where the routing of Bipole III project is concerned. They cite, as evidence of the appropriateness of government intervention, the involvement of Premier Ed Schreyer and his cabinet in the Churchill River diversion 40 years ago when different standards applied. There is at least an order of magnitude difference between the environmental and cultural impact of the Churchill River diversion of 40 years ago and that of an east-side Bipole III today, by any standard.

First of all, an east-side line requiring a right-of-way only 66 metres wide would affect only 0.025 per cent of the boreal zone along its route. That's one tree out of 4,000! The area has already been penetrated by provincial roads, logging roads, winter roads, mines, fishing camps and even power transmission lines. And more roads are planned.

A 2008 study by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) of the so-called "intact" area of "pristine boreal forest" that may be the subject of a UNESCO Heritage Site application revealed that less than one third of that area is populated by dense tree stands. According to the IISD report, the remainder consists of sparsely treed and open areas, wetlands, water bodies, shrubs, rocks and rubble. Besides, a two-km-wide corridor has been set aside for a transmission line in the proposed UNESCO application.

The IISD study put an annual value on the boreal zone within the proposed UNESCO site that works out to about \$300 per hectare. Careful selection of the required 66-metre-wide route through the proposed UNESCO site would limit the area of boreal zone required over the 150-km length of an east-side Bipole III to 100 hectares.

How does an annual opportunity cost of \$30,000 (\$300 multiplied by 100) justify the expenditure of an additional billion dollars for a west-side Bipole III?

It is significant that at least 15 out of 16 First Nations communities have indicated to members of the Bipole III Coalition (bipoleiii.coalition.ca) that they are not opposed to an east-side Bipole III.

West-side proponents like Black and Fernandez and members of the NDP government exaggerate the cultural and environmental impact of an east-side route for Bipole III while completely ignoring similar impacts of a west-side route. They attach no value to the additional concerns for reliability and the real cost of additional power losses with a west-side line and they discount the impact of a west-side line on agricultural operations in some of Western Canada's most productive farmland.

If a transmission line through the boreal zone has such serious impacts as the west-side proponents and the NDP government claim, how come these impacts are not being experienced with Bipoles I and II that have existed in the boreal zone for almost 40 years now? The implementing of the west-side decision doesn't even pass the test of openness in what is clearly a public issue.

If the members of the Bipole III Coalition have a "mentality," as has been argued by some west-side proponents, it is that they understand the importance of cost-benefit analyses that take into account all of the elements of sustainability -- the economy, the environment, human health and social well-being managed for the equal benefit of present and future generations.

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