

SITE C WOULD DROWN A VITAL BC BREADBASKET¹

Max Fawcett©

As we moved into our second, and third, cups of coffee, Ken and Arlene Boon, Sandra Hoffman and Ken Forrest itemized their concerns about the dam and its potential impact on the Peace River Valley that they loved and called home. I sat in the Boons' kitchen listening to the group talk about the potentially catastrophic effect the dam's reservoir would have on the migratory and mating patterns of local birds, fish, and ungulates. I heard their concerns about the social consequences that would result from the creation of the massive work camp that would be needed to construct the project.

If anyone needs a reminder of what kind of damage a dam can do, they told me, they need only visit the W.A.C Bennett Dam, the massive two kilometre-long earth-fill dam that was completed in 1967. Nearly 50 years on, the Williston Reservoir, a 70,000 square kilometre watershed that was flooded by the dam, remains a striking testament to the near-apocalyptic damage a dam can do to its surrounding environment. That massive reservoir, the largest body of water in British Columbia, was supposed to provide local residents with a valuable recreational resource and nearby First Nations communities with a bounty of fish and fowl. Instead, though, it is a dead zone, a toxic stew of dead trees and mercury-filled fish surrounded by the still-eroding banks, and recreational activity in the reservoir is limited to those with a taste for the extreme.

But as farmers, the damage that would be done to the Peace River Valley's agricultural capacity is what worried them the most. Why, they asked me, in an age where concerns about food security, global warming, and local culture are paramount, isn't the destruction of northern British Columbia's breadbasket a more pressing concern? It's a legitimate concern, and one that BC Hydro has yet to answer to their satisfaction.

Hydro Policies Already Stifle Food Potential, Say Farmers

While BC Hydro contends that only 50 hectares of agriculturally viable land would be submerged by the project, local farmers, many of whom have lived in the valley for three generations, believe the figure is closer to 5,000. These farmers have proven that the class-one soil in the valley is capable of producing everything from cantaloupe to corn, while the silt-heavy class-two soil is perfectly suited for the mechanical harvesting of potatoes on a scale comparable to the industry in Prince Edward Island.

The problem, they think, is that the imposition of the flood reserve and the implementation of a passive land acquisition policy in the late 1970s by BC Hydro put the valley on death row, creating a major disincentive to investment in agricultural activity. "You hear that talk, 'All they do is grow hay down there,' or 'All they do is graze horses,'" Ken Boon said, "but that's a combination of several things, one being that agriculture isn't the most profitable thing right now. But who's to say that won't change? The other thing is that a lot of the land is leased back from BC Hydro, and people don't want to invest too much in their infrastructure. But what I say to them is, at least we're not ruining it. It's basically like holding it in trust, and when the agriculture situation changes, which it could, this land would be so unbelievably important."

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Larry Peterson, a longtime resident of the Peace River Valley and an outspoken opponent of the Site C Dam during BC Hydro's first attempt to build it in the late 1970s and early 1980s, can attest to the valley's untapped agricultural potential. Peterson, who first saw the valley in 1968 before moving up there from Alberta a year later, bought 1,810 acres in partnership with his father-in-law and began working the land. "We raised up to 2,000 tonnes of potatoes with an irrigation system along the river," Peterson said by telephone in an October 2009 interview. "We farmed 3,000 acres of cropland, and had a 250 head cow-calf herd for many years. We supplied 25 per cent of the local market for many years through the Dawson Creek warehouses and the retail outlets, and we did that on just 110 acres that we rotated along the river."

A Special Micro-Climate

Despite being located in a part of the province better known for ice and snow than cantaloupes and corn, Peterson notes that the Peace River Valley's unique micro-climate allows it to produce the same yield and variety of crops as the fields of farmers located a thousand kilometers to the south do each year. "This land is comparable in climate to the Lower Mainland," he said, "because of the long growing-degree units in the summer time; we have longer days. The only other comparable part would be the lower Fraser River in all of British Columbia, period." Given its unexpected fertility, Peterson believes that if the Site C flood reserve were to be removed, the valley would be capable of feeding every single person in the Peace, from Tumbler Ridge in the south to Fort St. John in the north. "It would produce enough vegetables for the entire Peace River area," he said, "for the northern third of the province and the 65,000 people that live there, easily. We did 25 per cent of the market with just 110 acres."

In his recent book *Why Your World is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller*, Jeff Rubin, the former chief economist and chief strategist for CIBC World Markets, argues that the days of eating avocados in February are just about over, to be replaced by a renewed dependence on local agriculture. "In the new world of expensive oil and carbon tariffs," Rubin writes, "global cuisine, with its reliance on exotic imported ingredients, will soon be on the way out. Local fare, marketed under a green banner, is already on its way in." The catalyst behind that change is what Rubin believes will be sharp increases in the price of fuel, and with it a similar rise in the cost of transport and shipping. In other words, those South American avocados might be available at the Safeway in Fort St. John in February, but they'll cost ten dollars apiece.

The future, at least when it comes to what we eat and how we buy it, will look remarkably similar to the past, Rubin argues. "If you believe in markets, you may be surprised by what the future looks like," he writes. "Not personal spacecraft or gleaming megacities -- those are the daydreams of the era of cheap energy. The future will look a lot like the past. And that means more farms." Yet BC Hydro's Site C Dam, if built, would destroy the most fertile agricultural land in the northeast at precisely the moment when, due to rising fuel costs and shifting consumption habits, it would be of greatest use to the people who live on or near it. Moreover, it would also undermine the capacity of the surrounding land to support any meaningful agricultural activity as well. "If the dam were built, the remaining class one land, because of the climate change, would be ruined, and that includes the land that would be on the third bench," Larry Peterson told me. "That's a key point; the class one capability would be eliminated in the remainder of the entire valley."