

Letters to the Editor Letters to

A Pulp Mill For Athabasca?

Some long term issues to consider.

In recent issues of this paper several articles have been written in support of locating a pulp/paper plant near Athabasca. Indeed, it would appear that many of our elected and non-elected representatives have embraced the notion of a pulp/paper plant as an ideal solution to many of the region's economic difficulties. Even this newspaper has apparently uncritically endorsed the proposal and treated it as unquestionably "good news". While it is true that some local employment may come with the development of a plant in the region (though there are questions over the inflated job figures suggested in earlier coverage), there are serious issues related to this proposed development that have not been raised in the coverage so far. This article suggests two themes which should be brought to public attention to help allow the public to fully understand the implications of having a pulp/paper plant on our doorstep. These are first, the issues of environmental pollution and second, the effect of this sort of development on the other major industries in the area.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS:

Any pulp/paper plant must of necessity produce waste products. The real issue is what type of wastes are produced, in what quantity and what happens to these wastes? There are three categories of pollution associated with pulp/paper plants; air, water and soil pollution.

Perhaps the most easily recognized of these is air pollution. We have all had the experience of driving through a region where a pulp/paper mill is operating; the smell is unmistakable. The smell is a consequence of various sulphur and other compounds emitted as waste and it is not this odor. In addition to producing a generally repulsive smell, these sulphur compounds are a major factor in the creation of "acid" rain, which in turn can cause serious environmental damage. There is also a more direct health factor to be considered. For those with allergies and various respiratory conditions such as asthma, the environmental conditions in the region may deteriorate to the point where such people could have serious problems with the air quality. In a region such as Athabasca where air inversions frequently occur, the river valley essentially traps air in place (we've all seen the extensive winter "ice fogs" which cling to the low areas around Athabasca). When inversions such as this occur with sulphur emissions, the concentration of the pollutants in the air can increase dramatically, and the air can be very noxious.

Water pollution is the second major category of pollution with which we must be concerned. We like to use white paper because it gives us good contrast for printing. The whiteness of paper (such as this newspaper) is produced by a lightening of bleaching process. Most bleaching processes use chlorine compounds or other compounds which have similar effects. Some of these compounds end up in the waste liquid dumped into rivers. These compounds are toxic to invertebrates, fish and mammals. The types of chlorinated organic waste compounds produced in the pulp/paper process number into at least the hundreds, and the most of

these have not been studied in-depth, and so their exact impact on the environment is not known. Some of these wastes however are known to be toxic at even low levels of concentration and are potential poisons for anyone or any living organism using the water. Thus this would be of concern for anyone drawing water downstream for household or livestock use. Further, the bulk liquid wastes produced by pulp plants are organic compounds that use up large quantities of oxygen in their decomposition. This means that long stretches of river downstream from a mill will be mainly inhabited by bacteria, fungi and algae rather than fish and the invertebrates on which they feed. The anaerobic state of the water makes it unacceptable for most domestic uses.

The third area of environmental concern is the impact of a pulp/paper plant on the soil. Obviously when large areas of forest are cut, erosion is a major concern. Run-off from the soils enters the water system and may be a source of problems similar to the effects described above. Similarly, when forests are removed, the consequences for our wildlife reserves must also be considered. Likewise, various unused residues left over from the processing are typically buried in some form of landfill and the conditions of this site and the safeguards to be employed are also of concern.

LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT CONCERNS

While the question of environmental pollution is a serious issue, there is another area of concern which should also be part of a public discussion of a pulp/paper plant for the region. This issue has to do with the long term development potential for the area. The Athabasca region, being relatively close to one of the major population centres in the province, is one with strong potential for recreation and tourist development. Tourism is at present a strong and growing aspect of our economic base. Indeed, currently, and for generations, the Athabasca River has been a focus for family recreation, with fishing, canoeing, hunting and camping being popular pursuits. Similarly, the river is a source of our water, is a major link in the ecological cycle of the region, and has been of great historical significance. Realistically, the life span of a pulp/paper mill may extend to twenty or so years, while the potential for recreation and tourism development extends far into the future. The real issue here then is how would such a development affect the possibilities for future tourist industry development in the area? It is also important to consider how development of a pulp/paper plant would affect other potential industrial development such as an expanded agricultural base, or the possibility of developing an effective irrigation network, for example.

We are not adverse to economic growth and diversification but these development and environmental concerns are serious issues which must be addressed before we can make an informed decision as to the best course for us to follow.

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