

Local residents voice concerns about pulp mill

Two local residents, Barry Johnstone and Robert Holmberg, a Sociologist and Biologist respectively, and both employed by Athabasca University, are concerned that a proposed pulp mill for the area may not be all good news. In a press release issued to the Advocate, the two professors explained that they have two major concerns with the proposal and although they are not adverse to economic growth and diversification, they want the general public to fully understand the implications of having a pulp/paper mill on our doorstep. The following is an edited version of their press release.

Environmental Concerns

Any pulp/paper plant must of necessity produce waste products. The real issue is what types of wastes are produced, in what quantity and what happens to these wastes?

Perhaps the most easily recognized of these is air pollution. We have all had the experience of driving through a region where a pulp and 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 uncommon for areas 50 kilometres or more from a plant to be saturated with 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 asthma, the environmental conditions in the region may deteriorate to the point where such people could have serious problems with the air quality.

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 or bleaching process. Most bleaching processes use chlorine compounds or 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. Some of these wastes 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. Long stretches of river downstream from a mill will be mainly inhabited by bacteria, fungi and algae, making 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 problems described above. Similarly, when forests are removed, the consequences for our wildlife reserves must 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

The Athabasca region, being relatively close to one of the major population centres in the pro-

vince, 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.