

“Drought Proofing the Economy” Meeting – Regina, SK, November 4, 2004

As part of the federally- and provincially-funded 50-year Water Development Plan for Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Agrivision Corporation (SAC) held the “Drought Proofing the Economy” meeting in Regina on November 4, 2004. This \$299,500 first phase of the project was designed to, among other things, engage stakeholders so that “they become committed participants during the implementation phases”. Red Williams and Al Scholz, SAC, began by pointing out that recommendations from the Action Committee on the Rural Economy (ACRE) show that many of the solutions to the province’s economic problems all lead to water, that we’re not making good use of it and that by ‘re-jigging’ current methods, we can find a balance between the economy, the environment and people.

Wayne Clifton and Graham Parsons, Clifton Associates, then described how their 50-year plan would revitalize the rural economy through enhanced water use. They were followed by short presentations from Saskatchewan Forest Centre, Farm Credit Corp., Blood Tribe from southern Alberta, Tourism Sask, Sask Mining Assoc. Sask Power, with Minister of Rural Revitalization, Clay Serby, as the speaker at lunch.

All participants acknowledged that climate change is a reality, that the glaciers are melting faster than they can be regenerated, that Saskatchewan suffers from drought 2 years out of 10 and how “Saskatchewan’s water flows right past us and makes no contribution to our well being”, that, in becoming the new food processing hub in Canada, southern Alberta (Feedlot Alley!) uses an ever-increasing amount of water from the same rivers that flow into Saskatchewan and, although we say our water is not for sale, the US will soon be wanting our water real bad, etc., etc. So, part of the 50-year plan is to realize our full benefits of water development by building 15 dams and reservoirs on our rivers to, with the dam and Lake Diefenbaker already in place. This will ensure a constant supply of water for development – “use it or lose it” for more gas and oil, more mining, more intensive cropping, more value-added processing, and more ILOs for Saskatchewan’s “Green and Prosperous Economy”. Rural development, including processing centres, will be strategically placed in clusters around these irrigation systems, with this activity already occurring in the Outlook area.

Ann Coxworth of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society asked how well do they understand the role played by the underground aquifers in our ecological systems and how would their interference with the natural flooding process which regenerates many aquifers, rivers and lakes affect those systems. In his response, Mr. Clifton indicated that the government was no longer keeping records of the aquifers and that he/they had no data on aquifers - where they are, how big they are, how much water was in them, etc. (In our opposition to the pig factories, we have maintained the terrible threat that this lack of knowledge presents to our precious drinking water.)

Sandra Finley of Saskatoon stated that she was dismayed by the manipulation of information in Graham Parson’s power point presentation. For example, she

pointed out that the graph that shows the fluctuation in the water levels of the South Saskatchewan River in the period 1912 to present shows declining fluctuation that is presented as a positive consequence of a large dam on the River. What is the change in VOLUME of water in the River over the same period? The response from Graham Parsons was “yes, the fluctuations have declined....” Ms Finley: “I did not ask about fluctuation, I clearly asked ‘What is the change in VOLUME of water?’” Graham Parsons never did answer the question. (The answer is that over the period 1910 to present, the volume of water has decreased by 80%. The flow level is 20% of what it was in 1910. Several other questions drew attention to the selective nature of the information presented, all of which contributed to a very skewed understanding - provided by an "expert" as newspaper reports referred to Mr. Parsons.)

Following his luncheon address, Isabel Muzichuk of Buchanan asked the Minister of Rural Revitalization, Clay Serby, what his government was going to do about the ongoing toxic emissions from the hog barns at Rama that are making people in the area sick. In his response, he dismissed the issue by pointing out that our regulations are the best in the world and “if we’re producing 1 million hogs per year now, I want to increase that to 2 million hogs per year”.

Some other points of interest: In the future, Prince Rupert will be the port of choice for exporting our value-added goods to Asia, so highways and the port will be improved to accommodate containers loaded at the farm gate and put on ships to Asia. Investors can now apply to Sask Water Authority for permits to build private dams: all the design work for the High Gate Dam on the North Saskatchewan River west of North Battleford is complete. (The spokesperson for that project said in a recent CBC Radio interview that she had private investors ready right now to invest the \$700 M for it - private ownership of Saskatchewan’s drinking water.)

In his presentation, Larry Hayes from the Farm Credit Corporation pointed out that his company was available to provide funds for “large up-front capital costs...where infrastructure does not exist.” He added that, as a safeguard to investment, if a water user couldn't make the payments, the outstanding amount would be added to his annual RM taxes. (I recall a TV program I saw recently of African women and children waiting in line for hours to get their daily jug of water – they didn't have the money to pay for it so they didn't get any water - they busted the meter off its moorings and stole the water under cover of darkness....)

Robin Woodward of the Saskatchewan Forest Centre informed us that they are working on a plan to support poplar tree plantations on hog barn sites which would absorb seepage, reduce aerosols, remediate sites, turn waste water into a marketable product, and in 20 years, there would be 100,000 cubic meters of wood to process! (I recently read that farmers who have agreed to have the liquid hog manure spread onto their land are tearing out established windbreaks between their fields so the tractor dragging the manure hose can get through. I also read that because the sludge out of the bottom of abandoned manure cesspools is so toxic, no farmer will accept it on his land. It

seems they plant trees over the cesspools with the hope that the trees will clean up the mess left behind.)

Campbell Eaglechild from the Blood Tribe Reserve in southern Alberta demonstrated the workings of their 25,000-acre irrigation project (the largest such operation in Canada, second in size to the world's largest one belonging to a First Nations in the US). The water they draw from the St. Mary's Reservoir supports 6,000 head of cattle and grows hay which is then shipped to the US and Japan as value-added products. He alluded to neighbouring farmers being unhappy with the tremendous amount of water used by the Reserve but he shrugged and carried on with his presentation. (I couldn't help but compare his 'commercial' attitude about water to that of the First Nations people at the Safe Drinking Water Foundation Conference held in Saskatoon in September, 2004. To them, water is a sacred trust to be protected and cherished.)

Mr. Patrick from Sask Power indicated that they had been working closely with the Clear Green Company which has developed a biodigester that uses the manure from one of the mega hog barns at Cudworth to produce electricity for the industry plus the power grid.

In my comments, I pointed out the significant economic benefits our small village receives from the tourism industry, and that changing or fouling our as-yet pristine natural surroundings and water would be "anti-economical" and devastating. I also noted that water is a HUMAN RIGHT and no one has the right to deprive people of it or hold them up for ransom over water! And yet, this 50-year plan appears to be all about privatization of our precious water. I suggested that, for just a moment, we all step out of the little pink bubble we'd been sitting in all day and look at this issue from a different point of view. I added that, if Mr. Clifton is correct and they, in fact, know very little about the location or size of our precious underground aquifers, I would then, on behalf of the yet unborn children of Saskatchewan, request that they apply the Precautionary Principle combined with a Polluter Pay Assurance Bond so that this whole scheme doesn't backfire on all of us.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Williams offered their federally-funded report, Water Wealth: A 50 Year Water Plan for Saskatchewan for sale at \$100.00 each and concluded with a call to arms: "Let's Get Going"! He then declared Mr. Clifton the Chairperson of the newly formed Saskatchewan Water Council, the mandate of which is to "optimize development of Saskatchewan's ample water resources".

The evening concluded with supper and pre-recorded video messages from both Prime Minister Martin and Finance Minister Goodale, congratulating SAC on their 'vision' and on their Report, and promising their support for the project.

Most of the presentations, the Report, the Executive Summary, and the Terms of Reference for the newly formed Saskatchewan Water Council are on the website: <http://www.droughtproofing.com/publications.html>

It's disconcerting to note that there were no presentations on protection or conservation programs to educate the public about how to protect and more wisely use the water we have - the prevailing attitude is 'if we don't use it, we'll lose it' - it's business as usual, only more of it. How can anyone bother to do such an extensive study, publish a report and try to sell it to the people in these enlightened times of climate change, increased pollution which threatens our environment and our health, etc., without giving priority to conserving and protecting the life-giving gift of water?

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