

Wringing Joules From Water: Labrador ENGO Represented in COP26 Petition Rejecting Mega-Dams as Climate Solution

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Three hundred and forty organizations representing 78 countries petitioned the Parties to the UNFCCC Conference (COP-26) on Climate Change in Glasgow, Scotland to finally recognize that **hydroelectric power generated by mega-projects is not "green" energy.**

<https://nlenvironmentnetwork.us11.list-manage.com/track/click?u=49676f8c564b43e803499b04e&id=419827978f&e=fc43134921>.

Yet the petition had no effect, at least this time, aside from bland commitments to meet in the future for further discussions. In an interview, MP Elizabeth May detailed how the entire COP-26 event was consumed in its efforts to bind all signatories to the threshold of 1.5°C increase in the world's climate, thus limiting the discussion to emissions.

Grand Riverkeeper Labrador, Inc. was one of signatories. The groups insisted that climate mitigation efforts must reject so-called 'sustainable hydropower' as a solution to combat climate change:

<https://www.saltwire.com/newfoundland-labrador/news/labrador-group-signs-declaration-to-un-to-stop-hydroelectricity-from-being-marketed-as-green-energy-100663332/>.

Countries like Canada use hydropower as a way to 'trade' credits against other forms of 'dirty' energy.

Over twenty years ago, the World Commission on Dams (2000) estimated that dams had displaced up to 80 million people, and negatively affected an estimated 472 million people living downstream. That monumental work detailed the severity of downstream effects on riparian ecosystems, and stressed the importance of providing Environmental Flow Releases from dams to mimic natural flow dynamics, such as the spring inundations of the river floodplains. That in-depth work was not even considered in the environmental assessment of the Lower Churchill River. In fact, at its public hearings, Nalcor took the lead to announce that the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric development would have no adverse environmental impacts. This was yet another example of the failure of our environmental assessment processes—environmental green-washing at its best, facilitated through the voluminous glossy Environmental Impact Statement by its prime consultants. In the end, Nalcor ignored the recommendations of its *own* Independent Expert Advisory Committee (IEAC) that was initiated to address the impasse and outcry concerning predicted Methyl Mercury downstream contamination.

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts (PAC) through the Auditor General was, tasked with assessing to:

"... investigate and report on the breakdown of communication that resulted in the flooding of the Muskrat Falls reservoir in violation of an agreement between the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Innu Nation, the Nunatsiavut Government, and the NunatuKavut Community Council to abide by the recommendations of the Independent Expert Advisory Committee, which directed that wetland capping must precede any such flooding."

Why these important mitigations were not implemented seems to have been attributed to a "breakdown" in communications and "missed opportunities" in the minister's office of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Environment, pointing in particular to the Deputy Minister who seemed to have been of the understanding that wetlands in the reservoir footprint could be capped after flooding. How preposterous!

There is really something wrong when we can't integrate measures to mitigate downstream effects of a dam, such as environmental flow releases and/or remove or cap organic biomass from the reservoir footprint. But its even worst when senior civil servants are responsible for that inaction and are not held accountable. It would be a form of criminal negligence in a society that provided legal rights for the environment. Who in the public is fooled by such lame excuses?

We live in sad times when "communication breakdown and missed opportunities" is an excuse to do nothing, and allow the deeper poisoning and desecration of the central Labrador environment. PAC concluded:

"We could not determine a plausible reason why the wetland capping policy decision did not happen in a timely manner. "

(<https://www.assembly.nl.ca/business/electronicdocuments/AGReportPhysicalMitigationMFReservoirWetlands2021.pdf>)

The Premier should reread this first statement of the audit and take assertive leadership action.

Environmental mitigations have costs and by extension sustainable developments have capital costs. Muskrat Falls is now pretty much a done deed and this province will pay a deep price for its misdemeanour. Yet there is already talk of following-up with the Gull Island project. Here we see that the hundreds of hectares of wetlands that will be lost by flooding could be mitigated by environmental engineering, i.e., by limiting the height of inundation and/or engineering draw-down channels at the dam. Yet the project design remains hardwired to wring out every possible megawatt that can be generated, and in so doing, destroy all these ecologically crucial wetlands.

In its more simplistic form, hydroelectricity can be generated as a 'flow of the river' with little or no negative impact to the aquatic ecosystem. For example, a partial flow coming over a falls can be shunted through a turbine and returned to the river yielding significant power and having no downstream effects. But these mega-projects, like Muskrat Falls or Gull Island, seek to dam off the entire watershed, hold

back *all* the water and glean every possible joule of energy. In essence it is greed that continues the ongoing destruction of our natural resources; as Mahatma Gandhi stated " *... for greed all nature is insufficient...*"

Countries take much pride in their hydroelectric developments, and it is sad to know that carbon credits may be gained or even sought for such large-scale destruction of our natural heritage. If anything, the fiasco of the Muskrat Falls development should have alerted us to the importance of seeking alternatives to damming in order to generate electricity, the most obvious being the development of wind resource in this province. Surely it is time to revoke the legislation giving Nalcor total control of generating electricity in this province. Crown corporations do a poor job of being accountable to anything.

Clearly, Nalcor only has interest in hydroelectric development. It's time to follow the lead of other countries and provinces that encourage and provide incentives for private interests to put alternative electrical energy onto the grid. Step outside, and it's blowing a gale again. Newfoundland and Labrador is blessed with so much wind energy. It's time to heal from water on the brain.

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