

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT INVITES BIG WHITE TO TAKE KETTLE RIVER WATER; COMMUNITY TELLS BIG WHITE TO GIVE IT BACK

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In late 2007, Big White Ski Resort applied for water licences on three streams, Trapping Creek, Hallam Creek and Whitefoot Creek, in the headwaters of the Kettle River. They would store water taken from these streams in two new reservoirs. The application is to withdraw and store 488.3 million gallons. This represents a 256% increase over existing licences, which also draw on and store water otherwise destined for the Kettle River. As the Kettle River had record low flows in 2006, 2007 and perhaps 2008, citizens, towns in the watershed, and the Regional District have all requested that the Provincial Government hold a local, full Public Hearing on the matter. These requests have been ignored.

Big White's application and public notices indicated that 87% of this new water would go to residential purposes, 13% to snowmaking.

In 2003 Big White was granted additional licences for withdrawal and storage of 18 million gallons, otherwise destined for the Kettle River.

In 2005 Big White was granted licences for withdrawal of 45 million gallons for waterworks and storage of a further 56.2 million gallons for various purposes. The reservoir which was excavated for this withdrawal was to be completed by 2009 and would, according to Big White, hold 66 million gallons of run-off water, 22% more than the licenced amount. While this excavation was in progress, Big White stated that they were not short of water and that this licence would cover future needs for anticipated expansion plans.

Why then this new application? Because the Provincial Government, invited them to do so. This month media attention to the public's concerns brought some interesting comment from Big White and Premier Campbell. Big White advised that they had no need for the water in the current application but they might need it at some distant unknown date for snow-making, given the possibilities of global warming. Big White also talked of plans for golf-courses, required to make Big White a year round resort. It appears that the original stated purposes for use of the water are inaccurate and water is intended for snow-making and proposed golf courses. Two extravagant and unjustifiable uses for water, being effectively drawn from a resource in trouble, the Kettle River.

Premier Campbell in response to questions about public concerns and lack of public consultation was quoted as saying "a regional water officer is responsible for reviewing the application, and that includes public consultation: no decision will be made until that consultation is complete: And it's actually an independent decision, it's not a political decision. It's made by the regional water officer. A year into the application, no public consultation is evident and Premier Campbell's remarks about an "independent"

decision are disingenuous at best, given that this application resulted from the Provinces invitation. In 2003 the then Ministry of Lands and Water was given a mandate to make public-lands and water available to development, to promote tourism. The Ministries have changed but the direction has not. Can independence exist in these circumstances?

Water Stewardship Branch, the Minister of the Environment, and Big White have all stated that proposed water withdrawals will have an insignificant effect on the Kettle River both as to amount and due to timing of the withdrawals during snow- melt, spring runoff or “freshet.” While Big White’s position may be understandable, the statements from Water Stewardship Branch and the Minister of the Environment are not, especially in the absence of full public consultations and the lack of any science to support their comments. The suggestion that withdrawals during freshet will have no negative impact on the river are dubious and imply that freshet volumes are “excess” or “wasted” waters conferring no benefits. The reality is that the Kettle River flows are dependant for most of the year on groundwater re-emerging into the river.

The groundwater that re-emerges in the Kettle depends on groundwater recharge provided in large degree by a strong and sustained spring freshet. In the absence of any hydrological studies on the Kettle which would document the Kettles’ dependence on the spring freshet, Government is free to speculate that withdrawals will have insignificant effects. Those who have observed the river over time feel otherwise. While it has been suggested that withdrawal volumes are also insignificant relative to total river flows, any existing licence withdrawals could also be called insignificant in relation to total river flows. Add them all together and we have a depleted river, one that is in serious trouble, with several years of record low flows in years that have had average precipitation.

A second significant contribution of a strong freshet is the beneficial effect on fish habitat. Scouring and cleaning of channels and gravels, deposition of large woody debris (LWD) in the form of uprooted trees or stumps has a significant impact on improving fish habitat. MOE has recent studies to show that the Kettle is an underperforming river in terms of fish populations. Those studies have recommended that artificial LWD structures, at public expense, be constructed to improve fish habitat. Such expense can provide a public benefit but it is an absurdity for the Ministry of Environment to be promoting and overseeing such activities while at the same time Water Stewardship Branch, within that ministry, is suggesting a reduction in freshet, which generates LWD naturally, is of no concern.

MOE Water Stewardship Branch has told us that Big White will be required to supply an “environmental assessment” on aspects of the application. This would be done by an Environmental Consultant of Big White’s choosing. As we understand it, this assessment would not be required to deal with the real issues, i.e. overall impact of increased development, snow making, effluent production, water saving options tied to development etc, but would be confined to assessing the local impact of the reservoirs, pump-stations and lines, on the local flora and fauna, Despite the limited scope of such an assessment, Water Stewardship Branch told us that the information would not be available to the public as it would be proprietary information.

The absence of hydrological studies that might better inform decision makers and the public is a recurrent problem. Canadian Press in August 2008 obtained an internal Environment Canada report from Dec 2007 under a “freedom of information” request. That report said: “we can no longer take our extensive water supplies for granted; government data on groundwater reserves is deemed sparse and inadequate, and that is in contrast to the U.S. which has spent more than a decade mapping its underground reserves; that Canada lacks sound information on the major uses and user(s) of water.”

We do however have recent studies on the Okanagan and Columbia watersheds which indicate that, based on the existing warming trends, and the possibility that this trend may increase due to global warming: “that likely lower snowpack, greater evaporation, and earlier melting will result in reduced flows in Spring, Summer and Fall.

Boundary Alliance is therefore suggesting that Big White withdraw their application or Water Stewardship Branch reject the application, until such time as studies and a Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan are in place for the Kettle. We suggest the immediate formation of an Independent Advisory Committee composed of all stakeholders and interested parties, to guide the preparation of such studies and plans, and we offer our time and resources to that end.