

RESORT STAKES CLAIM TO WATER

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By Mona Mattei

Questions from the audience at a press conference in the Okanagan on Nov. 19 featuring Premier Gordon Campbell brought unexpected attention to an application from Big White Ski Resort for additional water.

The application, submitted in late 2007, is to capture and pump freshet (snow runoff) to reservoirs for use over each year. Mark Andison, director of planning and development for the Regional District of Kootenay Boundary (RDKB), reported to the board of the RDKB that the application requests diverting water from Trapping Creek, White Foot Creek, and Hallem Creek, all tributaries to the Kettle River.

According to Michael Ballingall, senior vice-president of Big White, the application was made after the resort had received a letter from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts advising all represented ski area operators to make application for water rights in support of any approved and anticipated development. The original application was advertised for all interested parties to comment on in November 2007. In September of 2008, Steve Rowe with the Ministry of Environment performed a site inspection pertaining to the application.

MLA Katrine Conroy has requested that public meetings be held regarding the water licence application. Minister of Environment Barry Penner replied by letter indicating that the ministry has conducted "a cursory review of the water availability characteristics for the Kettle River and the anticipated stream withdrawals As the proposal would not affect the Kettle River flow regime in any significant way, the Water Stewardship Division staff have not recommended initiating a public hearing for this specific proposal."

Both the RDKB and the Village of Midway have asked the Ministry of Environment to host public hearings and to delay approval of the: application until the RDKB's proposed Kettle River watershed study is complete.

"Big White has indicated that they do not have an immediate need for the increased volume of water," said Bill Baird, regional director, (for Area E (West Boundary). "So we want them to postpone issuing any water licences until the study has been completed."

Brian Symonds, director of regional operations for the Water Stewardship Division of the Ministry of Environment in Penticton, explained that the application was part of a regular process for ski resort development. Whenever a resort is revising their master development plan they apply for their anticipated water needs in the future so that they do not have to apply year to year. He considers it to be very early in the processing of this application and agrees that there has not yet been any rigorous hydrology information gathered on the application.

"Big White is in the process of revising their master development plan," said Symonds. "Until they actually submit it, we don't intend to make a decision on this application. Because we don't know what will or won't get approved from the big picture perspective and the water is only one aspect of that. So right now the application is in a very, very preliminary stage."

Symonds says that the process allows for the ministry to grant the application, refuse it, or to place conditions on the licence.

Residents of the Kettle valley are not satisfied with the explanations received so far on the application. Al Grant, a member of the Boundary Environmental Alliance coalition of residents says that Big White should take the application off the table until a watershed management plan is in place.

"The main issue is that the river appears to be a river in trouble already with water levels being at historic lows in 2006, 2007," said Grant. "There's an acknowledgement that the fisheries are under producing by provincial authorities. And here we are with an application looking to take water from the spring run-off for Big White. We consider this a waste of the resource."

According to Grant, Big White has applied repeatedly over the past eight years for additional water licences and each time has identified that they were applying for more than they currently need.

"Ballingall has now spoken about using the water for snowmaking and future golf courses," said Grant. "The golf courses have never been mentioned in the application portion, but from our standpoint it makes it even worse. They can make the case that using the water for snowmaking, will result in the water re-entering the ground water system, but certainly not the golf course where the water evaporates. Their story is a little inconsistent."

Symonds says that the application is not going to be processed until Big White and the Ministry of Tourism approve the master development plan. The plan will undergo a public review prior to submission sometime in 2009.