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Worst policy decision yet

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THE decision last week by the Manitoba government to move forward in principle with a third major transmission line down the west side of the lakes is a tremendous policy mistake that flies in the face of all evidence and recommendations put forward by Hydro over the past 10 years.

It is becoming clear that this disastrous policy is being dictated to Manitoba Hydro senior management by government. My sympathies lie with the many employees, men and women, who pride themselves in working for an institution that is such a great boon to this province.

I can only imagine their frustration in watching this policy perpetrated upon the Manitoba public with no rational basis provided.

The government's primary argument for the western transmission line is that the boreal forest on the east side of Lake Winnipeg, in its entirety, needs to be protected. This is a dubious claim, given that the west side will traverse a larger amount of designated boreal areas (812 kilometres) than the east side (766 kilometres).

Claims that environmental groups in the regions where potential hydro exports would occur are lining up to lobby against the east line and could affect future sales are also unsubstantiated. Where are the press releases from these alleged groups, or even their names? Were these unnamed groups supporting Manitoba in protecting matters of environmental concern when North Dakota unilaterally decided to allow foreign fish species to pass into our Red River basin via the Devils Lake outlet?

Manitoba Hydro has already built a lower-voltage transmission line running along the east side of Lake Winnipeg to Poplar River, and another southward along the east side to Warren Landing. This leaves a short segment between them where there is no existing line.

Locating a UNESCO site in that region east of the lake does not exclude a transmission line running along the edge of the lake. There is still a considerable area that could be designated for protection without limiting the ability to complete the east-side transmission line.

The government's self-aggrandizing vision of a UNESCO designated area should, in any event, take a distant second place to the importance of the many Manitobans along the east side who would benefit from development of the region.

Will this government ignore the repeated requests by those citizens to enjoy the same benefits as other Manitobans?

Having committed in April 2007 to extend a "first leg" of an all-weather road on the east side of Lake Winnipeg to the community of Bloodvein, are we to presume second and additional legs will continue north to Poplar River and beyond?

How is it that development of the road is not a concern for the UNESCO site, yet the government is convinced that a transmission line in the same region would never receive environmental approval?

The development of the road is a positive move, but the reality is that it is far more intrusive to the environment than is a transmission line. Both the road and the transmission line are necessary developments

on the east side for all Manitobans.

The benefits the road and transmission line will bring are an appropriate trade-off for environmental impacts that can be minimized through proper engineering.

The total cost for this decision to the taxpayers of Manitoba is an outrageous \$400 million for immediate capital costs on the longer west route and the far more disconcerting \$250 million in lost power over the lifetime of the project.

Yes, that is \$250 million (in 2017 dollars) for accumulated annual line losses (lost hydroelectricity) due to the longer length of the west route over the east route.

This is equivalent to squandering enough power for approximately 45,000 homes, based on the annual average power consumption for a new residential dwelling.

Such staggering inefficiency is the absolute antithesis of "green" policy.

Not to mention that the longer transmission line will pose significant, if not overwhelming, challenges to allow "paralleling" of power in case one of the transmission lines is lost. In simple terms, this means diminished security of our power system when the east side would allow improved redundancy in transmission capacity, thereby providing benefits in this regard as well.

Environmental groups with no names, a grandiose vision of a UNESCO site, reckless spending of taxpayer dollars and wasting one of Manitoba's most precious resources with unnecessary line losses all add up to political interference for which all Manitobans will dearly pay in the future.

The government says an environmental licence for the east-side transmission line is unlikely to be approved. With all due respect, Manitoba Hydro, with its experienced engineers and managers, are more than capable of making that judgment.

It is high time the government got its nose out of the operational affairs of Manitoba Hydro and allowed the Crown corporation to provide its own direction to do what is necessary to bring continued prosperity to our province.

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