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FAST FACTS

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BiPole III
East, West, or Down Under

The Doer government's election promise not to proceed with the construction of Bipole III down the east side of the province has raised consternation from some critics. At the heart of the criticism is the fact that the west route is 455 km longer than the east route, and therefore more costly. Superficially they have a point, but a more in-depth analysis raises concerns the critics fail to address.

First of all, determining the value of any ecosystem using traditional economic tools is difficult, but we can reasonably assume that the value of the ecosystem on the east side of Lake Winnipeg is considerable. Critics have chosen to ignore this value and how it would be negatively affected, as well as other concerns associated with Bipole III, thereby making their argument appear stronger than it is.

Secondly, if a decision were made to proceed with the east route, Manitoba Hydro and the government would have to begin negotiations with the First Nations whose lands would be affected by such a line. First Nations are entitled to appropriate compensation, but at this stage no one knows what this would constitute, or how long it would take to reach an agreement. Although no one discusses this obstacle, the cost would surely be in the millions, perhaps hundreds of millions. Moreover, it is almost certain there would be legal challenges from environmentalists, again involving substantial cost. It is dishonest for opponents of the west route to talk about the savings of the east route while ignoring the extra costs that would be involved in this option.

Thirdly, the east side of Lake Winnipeg has been recognized globally as one of the last remaining large intact boreal forests left in Canada. This unique ecological resource is the habitat for a number of endangered species, and if it is kept in a reasonably pristine condition it can be the basis of economic benefits for First Nations people who live there. Conversely, the west side has been largely converted to agricultural land so a transmission line through this area would have fewer serious consequences.

Specifically, the habitat of the majority of the remaining herds of threatened Woodland caribou in Manitoba would be placed in jeopardy by the large linear disturbance of a transmission line. Both the Manitoba government and the federal government are duty bound by legislation to insure protection of this endangered species.

Furthermore, the line, if it were built on the east side, would go through at least three Provincial Parks and would jeopardize Manito-

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ba's chances of getting a highly coveted World Heritage Site designation from the United Nations.

In addition, there would be environmental consequences from the use of large amounts of herbicides annually to ensure that the transmission corridor right-of-way would be kept free of forest growth. There would also be additional stress placed on a number of species that are valued by hunters in the region. For example, southern hunters in their all-terrain vehicles would likely utilize this corridor to gain access to new hunting grounds in this remote area of the province.

Some of these same issues would be applicable if Bipole III were built on the west side. But the already significant development on the west side means that the net impact would be considerably less than on the east side.

There is a third option that has recently come to light, and this alternative would avoid the drawbacks of both land routes. Sadly, this option has been ignored by the critics but is fully supported by many people following this important debate.

In a well researched three-part article that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press in February of this year, retired geography professor John Ryan proposed that an underwater transmission cable be put through Lake Winnipeg. This would emerge at the northeast end of the lake and an overland route would then only skirt the northern edge of the boreal forest to power stations on the Nelson River. Manitoba Hydro did consider this proposal at one point, but later dismissed it.

However, Professor Ryan demonstrated that such a route would be less expensive than the west route, and when all additional costs are considered, it would also be preferable to the east route. Moreover, being under the lake, it would provide far greater security of supply than either of the land routes since they would be prone to the same natural disasters as the two lines currently in use.

To the credit of both the government and Manitoba Hydro, Ryan's underwater route is now being fully investigated by a consulting firm, which is required to present the results of its inquiry within three months. If this proposal is found to be economically and environmentally feasible, this is the route that should be adopted.

If for some reason the underwater route is not selected and the west route prevails, the additional costs of approximately $500 million is not too onerous. Since about 30 percent of our power is exported, this portion of the cost ($150 million) could potentially be transferred to customers out of province. The remaining amount, on a per capita basis, would be about $330, to be spread over the life of the project (50 years). This is a small price to pay for preserving a world-class ecosystem on the east side.

Proponents of the east route have charged the Manitoba government with interference by overriding Hydro's initial decision to proceed with the east route. Manitoba Hydro makes decisions based largely on economic concerns, whereas government has a mandate to consider a wide range of interests, including economic, social and environmental. Since Hydro is a Crown corporation, it is entirely within the government's mandate to set policies that are in the best overall interests of the people of Manitoba.

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