

Ochenski

BP=bad proposal: Don't mess with Flathead water quality

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There's a lot of greenwashing going on these days by corporate entities trying to bluff the public into thinking they're environmentally conscious when, in fact, it's the same old take the gold and give the public the shaft. One of the most egregious of the greenwashers is British Petroleum. The huge multinational corporation has launched a slick PR campaign that would have us believe that BP stands for "beyond petroleum." But as anyone who has looked at the corporation's plans for a massive coalbed methane project on the North Fork of the Flathead will tell you, BP stands for "bad proposal."

For 30 years, Montanans in the Flathead drainage have lived with a dirty black Sword of Damocles hanging perilously over their heads in the form of large coal deposits on the Canadian side of the border. These deposits are in the very headwaters of the North Fork of the Flathead River, and whatever toxins, sediments or other pollution the mining causes will drain like a toilet straight into the tributaries of the Flathead River and thence into Flathead Lake. Plans to mine the coal were defeated decades ago, but like a bad penny, the mining plans just keep turning up, with five new proposals in the last three years.

To their credit, Montanan elected officials of all political persuasions have always risen to defend the Flathead from trans-boundary pollution. Given what's at stake, however, anything less would be rightfully judged as dereliction of duty. The area, after all, borders the Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park, is home to the greatest concentration of grizzly bears in the Lower 48 states and, as recent fish-tracking has proven, just happens to be exactly where the cutthroat and bull trout that live in the Flathead go to spawn. Could you pick a worse place for massive, industrial-scale coal development? Probably not.

Most recently, Gov. Schweitzer and Sen. Max Baucus have rallied to the cause, using their considerable skills and power to attempt to deter our neighbors in British Columbia from trashing the North Fork. Baucus even got Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to stand up for protecting the area. Granted, given Rice's very short list of successful international negotiations, her title may carry considerably more weight than her person, but in a tough battle, you take your friends where you can find them, even if they're named Condi and they work for a goofball named Bush.

Truth be told, however, those who would defend the Flathead have their work more than cut out for them. For one thing, BP doesn't want the coal—at least not yet. They are after coalbed methane, the natural gas trapped in the coal seams that is extracted by pumping out huge amounts of groundwater to release the pressure on the gas so it can be captured, compressed and piped to market.

This process has already poisoned agricultural fields in Montana's Tongue River basin because the salty groundwater is discharged into river water that farmers use to irrigate. In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, the spiderweb of drill pads, compressors, pipelines and roads are wreaking havoc on the wildlife there. Sage hens, antelope, deer and elk are all being impacted thanks to these massive coalbed methane extraction activities. There is little reason to believe BP's activities wouldn't produce the exact same kinds of disruptions for the multitude of wildlife and fish species living in the North Fork's watershed.

Consider, for instance, that BP is proposing a development footprint that covers 50,000 acres—more than twice the size of Hungry Horse Reservoir. An estimated 225 miles of new road would be built in a currently roadless area. Thirty-seven new drill pads would be developed with 8 to 10 wells per pad, with a disturbance of 4 acres per well. Although current plans call for slant-drilling from the well-pads, should that method fail the road and well-pad density could increase ten-fold. Compressing the gas so it can be run through the new pipelines will require at least five compressor stations that will noisily run 24 hours a day.

Moreover, there is no proven re-injection method for the discharge waters, which would contain numerous toxic elements—so toxic that it has killed 100 percent of the fish in fatality tests.

To top it off, BP won't assess baseline environmental data prior to drilling, but intends to gather it during the exploratory process, while they're building the roads and drilling wells—not exactly what one might call "pre-disturbance data." As for the timeline on the pending catastrophe, BP says it wants to secure its "tenure"—what we call a lease—on the project by the end of the year, at which time it can immediately begin exploratory drilling.

None of this is good news for Montanans. And despite the fact that preserving the outstanding quality of the Flathead's waters has united virtually everyone on this side of the border for decades, stopping the destruction this time around will be a gargantuan task.

In his op-ed column titled "Bad for B.C.—bad for Montana," published last month in the Fernie Free Press, Sen. Baucus rails on the proposed coal mine, writing, "If the Canadian government agrees to this risky plan, and the Cline mine continues to go forward, I can guarantee that they are going to have the fight of their life on their hands. I won't back down, and I'll use every resource possible to make sure this proposal, or any like it, will never see the light of day."

Max deserves big-time credit for those words—but they would carry more weight if Montana wasn't pushing so hard to develop its own coal resources to the max. That blatant hypocrisy aside, when it comes to saving the Flathead, we need everyone we can get.

Gov. Schweitzer, Sen. Tester and Rep. Rehberg must now join forces with Baucus to shut down BP's bad proposal before the damage is done.

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