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September 20, 2016

RE: Comments for consideration on “Building a Stronger New Brunswick Response to Climate Change”

Dear Members of the Select Committee on Climate Change:

The discussion guide of May 2016, captioned above, is a good overview of the challenges we face in the coming years, if climate catastrophe is to be avoided. Because we are already so late in starting to take any significant action on climate change, we must right now confront these challenges and make the difficult decisions that will be required of us. The guide provides a credible starting point.

As we switch from a fossil fuel powered “old” economy to one based on renewable forms of energy, we must recognise and accept that there will be employment disruptions, as workers shift from the old economy to the new. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we undertake an energy plan that will take us to our goals for greenhouse gas reductions. Starting now, and going forward, decisions on energy projects must be based on sound science, and not on exaggerated promises of job creation and economic stimulation, by large corporations.

One of these decisions now before us is the application for the proposed Energy East pipeline and marine export terminal in Saint John. This project (like others before it) is being sold by its proponents as a huge source of local employment and economic benefit. The most likely outcome, however, is that there will be few permanent jobs, and that even many of the jobs in the construction phase will be awarded to workers from outside the local area – little more than a replay of the boom and bust cycles that Saint John and New Brunswick know all too well. Proponents of the Energy East project hope that it will allow for the sale of diluted bitumen from the Alberta tar sands on the open market. (Parenthetically, of what benefit to Maritime Canadians is this?) With plentiful supplies of higher grade crude available at low cost, and the world set to embark on a path to lower fossil fuel use, the basic premise of the project proposal would seem to be founded on questionable logic, and on thinking that is by now behind the curve. Could this turn out to be yet another out-of-step and little-used White Elephant, like the Canaport LNG terminal near Saint John’s Mispic Beach?

There are a number of other compelling reasons for disallowing the construction of the Energy East pipeline project. First, if any real progress is to be made on GHG reductions, we must stop expansion of fossil fuel use and accelerate conversion to cleaner forms of energy. It makes little sense to curb GHG emissions in New Brunswick, and then allow the export of one million barrels a day of GHG intensive crude to be shipped through our port. This makes a mockery of local efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Secondly, among the set of problems with this project is its effects on the rich marine environment of the Bay of Fundy, and beyond. One such problem will be the undeniably huge increase in tanker traffic in the Bay, and therefore increased risk of collisions with all species of whales present in the Bay, including the endangered North Atlantic Right Whales. A number of years ago, the ship traffic lanes were moved in an effort to avoid the areas most often frequented by the Right Whales. It is my understanding, however, that in recent years these whales have not appeared in their usual feeding grounds, and their new locations are unknown. While this may be an effect of global warming, (e.g., warmer than normal water temperatures in the Bay) upon the location of their food source (copepods), or due to other factors, the effectiveness of the lane changes may be at least partly reduced. Regardless, increased numbers of large tankers in the Bay mean increased risk of ship-whale collision, threatening all species of whales in the Bay.

Another problem exacerbated by increased tanker traffic is increased underwater noise pollution. Many species of marine mammals, including the endangered Right Whales, rely on sound for one or more of the following: communication, navigation, or location of prey. Low frequency sound such as may be produced by ship traffic, is of particular concern because these noises travel long distances in water, masking other sounds and further stressing these animals. To permit the Energy East project would be to minimize all of these the concerns, and to thwart the efforts of government departments like SARA, and of non-government groups and local individuals alike, who are working tirelessly to recover and protect them.

With increased ship traffic comes also the risk of ship to ship collisions, ship groundings, or other accidents at sea that may lead to disastrous spills of diluted bitumen or other petroleum products. The Bay of Fundy tides, strong currents and the harsh local climate are well known – such conditions would make any effective clean up attempt very difficult. To make matters worse, I understand that some fractions of the bitumen may sink, and thus be virtually impossible to clean up.

Our Bay of Fundy is a unique marine environment that provides employment to many New Brunwickers and Nova Scotians : in the fishery and related activities, in tourism and nature-related interests like bird-watching, whale-watching, boating and kayak adventures, and in the promotion of our unique geological history, to name only a few. The potential for many of these interests has barely been tapped. These assets are far too valuable to risk for the short term gain afforded by oil industry stakeholders. As we are all by now aware, with the effects of climate change, the Bay of Fundy ecosystem will be increasingly stressed – further stress caused by Man and his activities, like those associated with an Energy East project, simply must be avoided.

One forceful way of helping to reduce Man-made impacts would be to actually enact the as yet toothless New Brunswick Coastal Protection Policy. This document was prepared many years ago, but government after government has failed to muster the courage and political will to make it into law. It is high time. Another important step would be to set aside more marine protected areas, such as the recently protected Musquash estuary. These should include various marine and shoreline environments, and be of significant size and geographical distribution to provide protected areas for all types of plant and animal life present in the Bay.

Committee Members, already great changes have taken place in the abundance and distribution of various species in the Bay of Fundy. The Bay of Fundy salmon are in serious decline; the sardine weir fishery is all but gone; the ground fishery is all but gone; lobsters seem plentiful, but they are bottom feeders, and their present abundance may be due to an imbalance in the ecosystem. As I write this, it is being reported that virtually all the Puffin chicks on Machias Seal Island this year are starving to death – sadly, their parents cannot find enough small fish to feed them. In closing, I would like to pose two questions to you: How many canaries do we need to witness? Is it not time to act?

Respectfully submitted,

(original signed)

Leland Thomas, DVM