

Aquila target of more concern

By Leslie Plaskett

As the August 7 meeting approaches for the Regional District of the Okanagan Similkameen (RDOS) to reconsider the variance permit applied for by Aquila regarding tower height for their power substation, Pocket Desert Preservation Alliance (PDPA) members remain skeptical about the project.

They are not questioning the need for more electricity, spokesman Andrew Frank says, rather they are concerned about the 25 acres of Antelope-brush habitat that will be lost on the site, and fear for the health of other area species, among them the California Bighorn Sheep population, several rare bats, and Behr's Hairstreak butterfly, to name a few.

They are not alone in their concern. Dr. Geoff Scudder, a preeminent scientist, Professor Emeritus and former head of Zoology at the University of British Columbia, is also alarmed. "We are down to about 38 per cent of the original Antelope-brush habitat and we really can't afford to lose any more. And secondly this is a very sensitive site for bats and other things and any environmental interference is going to disturb the habitat for the what is living on the cliffs nearby." He says this includes the noise of the construction and the general disturbance and increased activity that will be there at any time.

Scudder points out that while he doesn't know the precise details of the PDPA initiative, he is going on first principles. "We need to save every bit of Antelope-brush habitat and we know that with bats and some of the birds like the Canyon Wren, the more disturbance, the more likely they are going to forsake habitat. And there are not many cliff faces like that around. It is a unique habitat."

He says 25 acres is a large area in the scheme of this endangered ecosystem, "that is a big piece of land, it is a large chunk." Power lines also present a problem "they interfere with their (the bats) flight path and of course they are out feeding all the time," he explains.

In terms of studies done on the impact on raptors Scudder says "you need to think about not just the one time of year but what goes on up there for a whole cycle right through the year." Doing a study at just one time is not good enough he says adamantly, pointing to the Behr's Hairstreak as an example, "They only fly in the last weeks of June and early July and if you don't do the study then you don't know if they are there or not." And each year can be different depending on weather he says "so times can't be picked out of the blue and relied upon as representative."

Scudder suggests speaking to Denis St. John, who lives in Okanagan Falls, and is a butterfly expert. He and other scientists just recently completed a highly publicized study of the Behr's Hairstreak butterfly, a rare invertebrate that is wholly dependent on Antelope-brush for its life cycle. In a recent email he advised that during the study, "Behr's Hairstreaks were found on properties just north and adjacent to the Aquila property north of Gallagher Lake."

Frank says the environmental impact studies Aquila is required to undertake do not go beyond the actual 25-acre substation land, "They do not have to look at the impact on the air or the surrounding cliffs and we think this is wrong. We don't think that anything should be approved until the raptors and fly ways are studied."

While Area "C" Director, Joe Cardoso, mentioned previously that Aquila will perform testing on the raptors this fall, Frank is curious to know what the parameters of this testing will include, "how are

they going to test? Will it just be on their property and is this a valid time to test?"

He adds that there has been no testing on the economic impact of this substation, and Frank says "they have totally side-stepped the whole issue of the Bighorn Sheep and that the local recovery team for the sheep has its concerns." He notes that the fact the president of the Foundation for North American Sheep has written a letter to the RDOS is very significant.

Another problem the PDPA has with Aquila is their assessment of noise from the station and lines and the impact this will have on certain species. "They also side-stepped the suggestion by the University of Calgary professor in acoustics that they get an accredited member of the Acoustical Society to do testing. He said they needed to take into account the cliffs, the canyon reverberation and the effects on animals," Frank points out.

Many letters from experts and leaders in biology, entomology and conservation have been written to the RDOS, Frank says, including one from the President of the Federation of BC Naturalists and Dr. Scudder. And although he has not had access to them he is relieved to know that board members will have had the opportunity to read them. "Letters make a big difference."

While the variance permit will be granted or not within the next week, the actual development permit is not up for consideration until later on in the fall and if it is not issued, then Frank believes Aquila would not be able to build.

The PDPA is hopeful that the local government act and Official Community Plan (on which Oliver citizens had input) will come into play to help protect the area. The group feels that although Aquila purchased the property 15 years ago, "times change and just because you have a large chunk of property, that doesn't mean to say you could years later build an arsenic plant on it or something equally harmful to the environment, that isn't allowed now."

Frank adds that things also change around a property and that is why there are Official Community Plans are important because they reflect what people want to see done with their community." The strongest thing in the policy of the Regional board's OCP is their mandate to discourage development on environmentally sensitive properties.

But it is all a matter of interpretation ultimately and that is why the PDPA is keen to see the 1999 Acres environmental screening report conducted by Aquila. So far they have been denied access to it although Frank says transparency on this issue would go a long way for the company. "It will show that Aquilla is actually committed to letting people know what it is all about and that they are truly trying to satisfy everyone's concerns."

This report looks at the two options, the substation and the Warfield Penticton line, and typically would include an examination of the socioeconomic impact, the environmental impact and the aesthetic impact of both.

Frank says he disputes the statement Aquila made regarding Antelope-brush still being at risk if the Warfield Penticton line were to be put in rather than the substation. "I've looked at the existing lines where they are located on the Osoyoos Indian Band land and I see poles that are a matter of three feet away from Antelope-brush that are at least 80 years old. With poles you are just auguring holes and placement of the holes can be accomplished without affecting neighbouring plants. At the substation they will be cleared off the property."

Regarding the total amount of habitat left, Frank points out that in 2001 it was 3898 hectares and Aquila has rounded that up to 4,000. He makes two points. First that the figure is two years old and secondly that you can't round numbers up by 100 hectares when you are dealing with endangered habitat. "Basically there is just slightly over 3,000 hectares left."

The groups believes that although it may sound extreme when it comes to building in such environmentally sensitive and endangered habitat the engineers should just have to go back to the drawing board. Frank is says the it is important for people to know that the Okanagan is "literally leading the way in North America in habitat destruction and it is one of the three most endangered in all of Canada."

And while the Desert Centre in Osoyoos may be doing excellent work there is no program currently underway that studies the reestablishment of Antelope-brush because it cannot be done except with seedlings Frank explains. Executive Director for the Centre, Joanne Muirhead agrees, "Our science and research is mostly with the restoration of grasses and the overall habitat to increase biodiversity." She adds they have had no contact with Aquila at all regarding restoration, "they have not approached us."

One of the most unsettling aspects regarding Aquila outside of the species at risk and habitat, Frank says, is the discrepancy in figures that occurred in a matter of hours regarding the number of poles that will exceed 15 meters. "They went from saying seven poles the night before at our meeting, to 17 poles the next morning when they met with the RDOS. I find that very interesting."

There is a reason that top scientists are opposing this and it all boils down to this being one of the most endangered habitats," Franks says, adding that, "this project will destroy a part of it."