

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

\* Transcribed

### ***The Path to Coordinated Engagement with First Nations***

**Geoff Recknell**

First Nations Initiatives Manager, Integrated Land Management Bureau

**Question:** (19:45) I think an important step in getting the government's house in order — and I'm not talking about, because I'm not First Nations, I'm just talking from the perspective of a member of the government — I think it's really important for government agencies to approach a project that's under consideration from the basis of, 'Is this an appropriate project for this particular area and circumstances?' And I've had quite a bit of experience with the environmental assessment process and people in the environmental assessment office have acknowledged to me that they approach every project on, 'How can we make this proceed?' not 'Should it proceed?' If you begin with that kind of mindset, it's very difficult, at the end, if there's a lot of problems and a lot of opposition, for the agencies and the government to say no. In fact, with an environmental, certainly with mines, there's only once been a project turned down and that was North Kemess. So, I think there needs to be a change of attitude in entering into these kinds of processes.

**Answer:** (22:00, Recknell) You're correct in your assessment. The environmental assessment office operates within a context which assumes that those social choices or the appropriateness of a certain project within an area has already been made and the forum for that was the land use planning forums that occurred primarily through the '90s. I know that you were involved in some of those Rosemary.

(Questioner) I don't think they really resolved that.

(Recknell) Yeah, you raise a good point. And I think the question really is how do we keep those plans up to date through time as the social choices may change or new information comes to bear on those that may change what the plans say. One comment I would like to pick up on in terms of the number of projects that get turned down by the environmental assessment office — I know when you look at the numbers that it seems like that if you enter the program process you come out with a certificate and many projects do fall off that process as they work through because of the way it is structured. They find out as they're working through the detailed information requirements that the project doesn't make sense or they can't address the environmental issues, or whatever it is, in a reasonable or cost effective way. But if you go to the environmental assessment website and look at the project information there you'll see that there is a lot of them that have gone inactive or they've withdrawn their applications for that reason.

**Answer:** (23:33, John Fraser) I'm very impressed with what this lady said. I'm also impressed with what you've set out there. There's not just one way to do things. For instance in some aspects of our recommendations, we just can't, for a number of reasons, go that far or in that direction. We would be satisfied, I think, if we know that the objective is being reached. Coming back to what you have said about the attitude when something comes in

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front of us, let's take home that new thing for a moment. Everybody who put in propositions to start exploration for coal-bed methane, as I mentioned before, probably got at least nods of approval. It was very, very difficult for the government to come along later under tremendous political pressure and start to say no. Not only that, it was unfair. And fairness is something that has to apply whether it is industry or non-governmental organizations, First Nations, and everybody else. It's not fair for that industry to think that it's got the support of government that it wants someday and they'll spend millions of dollars on it. How [inaudible] to make sure that doesn't happen. Again, thank you very much for the presentation.

**Answer:** (25:21, Recknell) I need to be frank and direct on that point. I mean I don't think that the plan that's laid out here in this work towards collaboration fully addresses that issue. I think the point you are raising is very related really to what Rosemary is saying, which is, we have to understand what the social objectives and use the land use planning processes to help inform those, so we know whether or not activity is going to be acceptable. Because the review processes, such as the environmental assessment office or the processes that agencies go through on permitting, can't consider those questions. It's a challenging area and I don't have a good answer for you.

**Comment:** (26:15) Not so much a question, but rather a comment, and I suppose in some respects I share John's optimism with respect towards what was presented. However, after years of informed scepticism as a First Nations leader, it's hard to get past that and I think that we're all here with that open mind that we get past some of the scepticism. However, when I hear comments like, 'this process is evolutionary', it suggests to me that it's going to take a heck of a long time and it requires trust from the First Nations' part in creativity and risk taking and time. In some respects or on some issues, particularly habitat, we might not have that time. Are we willing to risk the watershed in the hope that this process will catch up to the problem? So I think we're going to have to have more discussion on this with respect to what does that really mean, what is the government really saying when it says it requires trust, creativity, risk taking, and time? I think it's time. I think it's what we're hearing here from the people in the room. It is time that government and industry started to take time and started to trust, and be a little bit more creative with respect to how the government pushes forward a project, because with the way it's going right now it simply doesn't work and that's why we are here.

**Comment:** (28:15, Brian Riddell) Thanks Gerald. I don't think that really does require a response, Geoff, so thank you very much. I like what Gerald said because, really, when you talk about risk taking habitat that makes me uneasy, personally, because we have a history of taking risk with habitat. Every mistake takes much, much, much longer to repair. And in all honesty, most of the time, we can't repair. We talk about mitigation, and what we're going to hear under wild salmon touches on that sort of thing. But habitat is tough to just simply replace, and I think we take that way too glibly.

**Comment:** (28:55, Recknell) I agree. One final comment. And I've heard these words used today already - we can do a lot better if we're all in a room discussing things in a collaborative manner and that's really what that point is about is that we do come to the table together to find solutions.