

TC Energy's Proposed Energy Storage Facility a Threat

By Kellie Haslam

Waking up each morning to the breathtaking scenery of Georgian Bay, with its crystal-clear blue waters and rugged shores, fills me with gratitude for the natural beauty that surrounds us. However, this sense of appreciation is tempered with concern as I reflect on the looming threat posed by TC Energy's proposed energy storage facility in the region.

If approved, the proposed open-loop pumped storage facility would be built on the existing operational 4th Canadian Division Training Centre situated north of Meaford. To function, the facility must pump 23 billion litres of water 150 metres up to a 375-acre reservoir carved out of the Niagara Escarpment and release it daily back into Georgian Bay. For context, that's 9,200 Olympic-sized swimming pools worth of water in a hole the size of Toronto's High Park being flushed back down the Escarpment every day. The scale of this operation raises serious concerns about the potential environmental impact on water, land, and wildlife, jeopardizing the entire fragile ecosystem of the Georgian Bay basin.

Immediate Opposition

Opposition to the project was immediate, with outrage only intensifying as more information about the risks, costs, and procurement process emerged. Save Georgian Bay, a volunteer advocacy group, has been working tirelessly to shed light on these issues.

Of primary concern are the environmental risks posed by the project. The Department

of National Defence warns that the project could devastate approximately 10 per cent of the wildlife at the 4th Canadian Division Training Centre. This includes up to 30 Species at Risk residing in the proposed project site on the Niagara Escarpment. Moreover, disrupting the soil at the training centre, heavily contaminated from years of military activity, could spread heavy metals and toxins into Georgian Bay. This contamination could harm marine animals and pose risks to individuals and municipalities drawing water from the bay for personal and agricultural use.

TC Energy's assertion that the project will cause "no harm" to the environment appears dubious when considering the destruction of 375 acres of the Niagara Escarpment, elevated water temperatures in Georgian Bay, and the adverse impact on fish populations. They boast of a "state of the art" design (which they have declined to make public) featuring a net that would protect some larger fish but fail to provide data about how many smaller fish and eggs would be killed despite the net. Regarding concerns about the water temperature, TC Energy claims that the change expected to be caused by the facility is not "statistically significant." Experts, however, warn that any change in water temperature over the long lifespan of the project would be impactful on aquatic habitats.

TC Energy attempts to greenwash the project by touting the production of emission-free power capacity and the reduction of the province's reliance on natural gas power production. Calling this project "green" is questionable. Currently,

excess energy from the Bruce Nuclear Plant is exported to the United States. If some of this excess energy is diverted away from export to operate the pumped storage facility, these states would turn on their gas and coal plants, adding carbon to the environment. These emissions, and the 490,000 tonnes of carbon that would be introduced into the environment to construct the facility, undermine its purported environmental benefits.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of low-carbon technologies, viable alternatives are emerging quickly, and by 2030, when the pumped storage project could potentially come online, these alternatives could address the province's energy storage needs with minimal environmental impact.

High Price Tag

The project's exorbitant price tag is another cause for concern. Despite findings from Ontario's Independent Electricity System Operator (IESO) that the project does not economically compare favorably to existing non-emitting resources, Energy Minister Todd Smith is determined to push it forward, burdening Ontarians with significant financial and environmental costs. The IESO recommends that the province's long-term energy storage needs be procured via a "competitive mechanism." However, this project was an unsolicited bid by TC Energy and, if approved, would essentially be



Georgian Bay at Meaford, with the Niagara Escarpment in the background. PHOTO BY KELLIE HASLAM.

a directed contract, bypassing competitive tendering.

Save Georgian Bay is not alone in its concerns. Resolutions opposing the proposed project from the Township of The Archipelago and the Town of the Blue Mountains further underscore the widespread opposition to the initiative. Yet despite mounting criticism, the provincial government persists in considering the proposal.

The proposed energy storage facility in Georgian Bay demands thorough scrutiny. It is crucial to balance the need for sustainable energy solutions with the preservation of our natural ecosystems. As the debate continues, the fate of Georgian Bay's delicate environment hangs in the balance, highlighting the importance of informed and responsible decision-making to secure a sustainable future for generations to come.

Kellie Haslam is a member of Save Georgian Bay, savegeorgianbay.ca.