

Driving a Highway through

Burns Bog



Gateway's South Fraser Perimeter Road to Ecosystem Destruction

by Stephanie Orford

Should Delta sacrifice a keystone ecological region for a chance at economic growth? Many Delta citizens and environmentalists are outraged by the proposed South Fraser Perimeter Road (SFPR), a four-lane highway to run along the south side of the Fraser River, and by their inability to give input on its development. The provincial government signed the SFPR design, build, finance, and operate agreement on August 12th with the Fraser Transportation Group, a conglomerate of companies that will build the road.

Eliza Olson, president of the Burns Bog Conservation Society, says the proposed highway would have myriad disastrous effects on Delta's Burns Bog and surrounding ecology. "We're not opposed to the road. We're opposed to its location," she told the *Watershed Sentinel*. "There are alternatives."

The road would put many species at risk, including the sandhill crane and migratory birds, and would run through the only known habitat in BC of the southern red-backed vole. The SFPR would also cut off water drainage from the bog into the Fraser River, endangering the plankton that get their nutrients from bog runoff, and thereby the fish that feed on that plankton, Olson says. This situation is not unprecedented – bog degradation has already reduced fish populations in the UK.

The SFPR, a part of the federal/provincial Gateway transportation project, would also destroy part of the bog itself, and the bog's ability to provide fresh water for irrigation to surrounding farmland. Alongside its effects on the bog, Susan Jones of the Boundary Bay Conservation Committee told the *Watershed Sentinel* by email that the road would decrease air quality of the region, encroach on areas reserved for farmland (the Agricultural Land Reserve), and destroy two key First Nations archaeological sites.

According to Olson and Jones, the BC government has all but ignored warnings by the project's scientific advisory panel, whose powers have been

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very restricted. The SFPR has received an inadequate, “piecemeal environmental assessment,” says Olson. “Without proper cumulative assessment of the whole Pacific Gateway Strategy, we risk incremental destruction and collapse of the integrity of the Fraser River Estuary ecosystem,” said Jones.

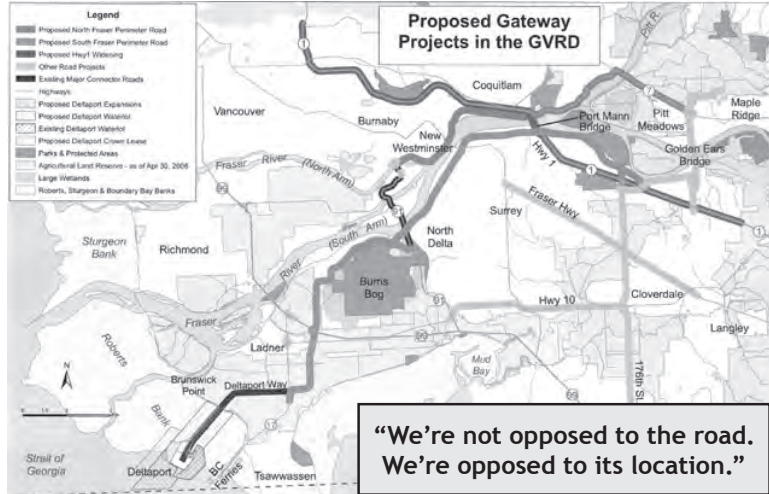
“They like to say it’s not going through the bog, but it is,” says Olson. “It’s just they have skirted the conservation area.” The road building process would be allowed to destroy crucial environment by finding loopholes like this one in the regulatory system, she says.

The Gateway Project has been in the works since 1994, when it was initiated by representatives of the transportation industry in the form of the Greater Vancouver Gateway Council. Construction is projected to cost \$658 million, “excellent value for taxpayer dollars,” according to Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Shirley Bond.

When the SFPR Agreement was announced, the Honourable Stockwell Day, the President of the Treasury Board of Canada and Minister responsible for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, said that the route was an “important national trading connection with the Asia-Pacific,” and would create jobs and enhance traffic flow throughout metro Vancouver.

Local businesses will also profit, said Bond, adding that the SFPR “has been part of regional plans for the past 20 years, including the Greater Vancouver Livable Region Strategic Plan.”

The Agreement press release also states that the road plan includes measures to maintain environmental integrity by improving wildlife habitats, managing Burns Bog’s water runoff, and providing irrigation for local farms. It posits that the region’s air quality will actually improve as a result of reduced traffic congestion. Critics of the plan contest all these statements.



Although the deal has been signed, Olson believes it is not too late to change the plan. She suggests alternatives to the plan, including upgrading existing roads, increasing public transportation, and using short shipping from Delta to Prince Rupert.

Some have suggested that Delta apply for Ramsar (where the first international conference on wetlands was held) and UNESCO designations to protect the Bog.

Bog ecosystems should not be underestimated, says Olson. Along with hosting a plethora of flora and fauna, some rare, Burns Bog is a massive carbon sink, and acts as Greater Vancouver’s thermostat, absorbing and releasing water in the atmosphere, which regulates temperature for kilometres around. “If Burns Bog is destroyed, living in Vancouver is going to be hell,” she says.

Stephanie Orford is a freelance science writer based in Burnaby. She recently returned from a trip to Iceland, covered in volcanic ash.

For more information
 Burns Bog: www.burnsbog.org
 Gateway project: www.th.gov.bc.ca/gateway/SFPR/sfpr.htm



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