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Peel plan right the first time: commission chair

By [Nadine Sander-Green](#) on July 29, 2011 at 4:09 pm



Photo by Vince Fedoroff

DEBATE'S VIGOUR UNSURPRISING – Dave Loeks, the chair of the Peel Watershed Planning Commission, makes a point during a news conference held earlier this week.

David Loeks says having more “balance” was one of the most difficult requests from the Yukon government when creating the final plan for the Peel watershed.

“The Yukon government said they wanted more balance, whatever that means,” Loeks, who chairs the Peel Watershed Planning Commission, told a news conference earlier this week. “That was one of the difficulties we had; it wasn’t very specific.”

The planning commission released its final plan Monday to the government, the four affected First Nations and to the public. The plan stuck to its previous recommendation that 80 per cent of the watershed be protected, which was rejected by the government.

Last February, the commission received a one-page response to its recommended plan from the minister of Energy, Mines and Resources and a four-page technical response.

In it, the government said it would like the commission to “re-examine conservation values, non-consumptive resource use development to achieve a more balanced plan.”

Loeks said the commission had neither the time nor resources to go back to a previous planning stage.

“When it came to request for more balance, the difficulty we had with that was, ‘Where do you have in mind, how much do you have in mind, what are the reasons for this?’” Loeks asked.

“We didn’t have a lot to go on. What that implied was go back to the drawing board.

“In our view, we thought, ‘You know, we’ve got six weeks to do this and if you take the planning process seriously, to go back to the drawing board means going back to a previous stage in panning process.’ There was no provision for that.”

Loeks said the commission is basically saying, "We more or less got it right the first time.' "

Energy, Mines and Resources Minister Patrick Rouble said in an interview earlier this week he is not able to comment on the commission's confusion with the word "balance" without hearing it directly from the commission itself.

Loeks said the commission was able to meet the government's other requests.

"It's fair to say the vast majority of the technical recommendations and responses, we were able to meet in one way or another," he said.

"This document is substantially different as a technical document. It's more streamlined, easier to read and it's less onerous for the people who actually have to use it."

On a broader level, Loeks said, the biggest challenge was trying to please two mutually contradictory interest groups. If you have to make a choice, he added, it's better to make a cautious approach which preserves future options.

And this, he said, ends up being a conservation-oriented approach.

"Or philosophical belief was society in its wisdom can always change its mind and renegotiate later, but if you choose for development at this stage, doors start to close really quickly," he said.

Always looking at the issues from both a scientific and philosophical point of view was another challenge for the commission.

When you've got your nose down looking at caribou data, Loeks said, it's sometimes hard to recall those large, philosophical public interest questions.

Loeks admitted he was not surprised how heated the Peel debate has become in the past several years.

Watching the environmental community and development community talk to each other in the past three decades, he has seen very little new ground being turned over.

"The planning process is designed for people to talk, clarify, yak at each other, argue with other, speak face to face in front of mikes and get it all out," he said.

"I would not say that anyone's point of view is more valid than another's point of view. I've got my vision, or view of the Peel, and you've got yours."

Loeks said the commission was, though, always trying keep to an "objective yardstick" in order to serve the public interest. And that goes back to trying to preserve future options when the public cannot agree.

"That's actually a little more hardheaded than anyone has been talking about," he said.

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