

Should the George Massey Tunnel Replacement Project undergo a review under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act?

by Susan Jones

A BC Provincial Environmental Assessment is in progress for this massive project but no federal environmental assessment has been scheduled as of August 2016. In this article I will summarize the many reasons why a review under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act is considered essential.

The BC Ministry of Transportation & Infrastructure (the Proponent) proposes to replace the George Massey Tunnel with a ten-lane bridge spanning the South Arm of the Fraser River and Deas Island. This will include:

- Decommissioning and removing the George Massey Tunnel, Deas Slough Bridge and related infrastructure
- Widening Highway 99 from Bridgeport Road in Richmond to Highway 91 in Delta
- Replacing the interchanges at Westminster Highway, Steveston Highway, and Highway 17A.

This will be the largest bridge ever built in BC with an estimated cost of \$3.5 billion. At three kilometres long, the cable-stayed bridge will be 65% longer than the recently completed Port Mann Bridge.

Environmental Impacts

- The George Massey Tunnel Replacement Project will transform the lower south arm of the Fraser River into an industrial highway significantly degrading one of the most extraordinary freshwater stream ecosystems in the world.
- The degradation of Fraser River habitat disregards global recognition of the lower Fraser which supports the world's greatest salmon runs and Canada's Most Important Bird Area supporting millions of migrating birds on the Pacific Flyway.
- The 2012 Cohen Commission warned that multiple types of stressors are interacting in a cumulative way negatively impacting sockeye runs and contributing to a 20-year decline in productivity of the Fraser River.
- The Cohen Commission stated Canada's commitment to the United Nations' World Conservation Strategy calls for "the maintenance of the support systems for fisheries and for the control of pollution".
- As there has been an ongoing failure to credibly assess the cumulative environmental impacts of past, current and future projects in the lower Fraser River, estuary, and narrow shipping lanes to the Pacific, the Massey Tunnel Replacement Project should be referred to a Panel Review under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.
- Removing prime agricultural land in Delta and Richmond to build this bridge places jobs and long-term food security at risk. Once a corridor like this is built, urban sprawl inevitably follows. This does not correlate with the Greater Vancouver Regional Growth Strategy.
- The nearby farmland also supports Canada's largest number of wintering birds of prey. Some hunt at night so the tall bridge will result in bird strikes and light pollution will impede hunting on the farmland and along the river.
- The Project will impact species that are dependent on the interactive, interdependent habitats of the river, shorelines, waterways, ditches, farmland and Burns Bog.

- The bridge, new terminals and larger ships along the river will impact shorelines that have been classified as highly productive fish and wildlife habitat for numerous species including federally and provincially listed species such as White Sturgeon, Great Blue Herons, Eulachon, Pacific Water Shrew, Streambank Lupine and Sandhill Cranes.
- The bridge will impact a critical fall staging area for Sandhill Cranes. No other large group of Sandhill Cranes are known to occur in the region. They require the habitats of both Burns Bog and the surrounding agricultural lands. The cranes have been using this area since the 1800s and are very sensitive to disturbance.
- Noise and light pollution from construction, pile-driving, tankers, and bridge operations will drive several species away or kill them off.
- The claim that the Project will improve air quality lacks sincerity and is not substantiated with accurate science. Increased traffic congestion and associated emissions will move from the tunnel area to the Oak Street and Knight Street Bridges.
- The massive bridge is expected to accommodate double the number of current truck movements if the Deltaport expansion goes ahead.
- As it is clear that the bridge is planned to accommodate increased shipping vessels and industrialization along the river, there needs to be a more comprehensive, inclusive, air quality assessment. Impacts of emissions on the public, the adjacent farmland soils, waterways and wildlife in the area need to be included.
- There will be significant impacts on the Fraser River habitats from:
 - shoreline modifications, pile driving, ground stabilization works, and construction
 - removal of the existing Massey Tunnel
 - plans to perpetually dredge 34 kilometres up the river from the estuary in order to deepen the navigation channel from 11.5 metres to 15.5 metres
 - removal of the tunnel and dredging to facilitate Panamax and Aframax tankers up the Fraser River for the first time in history
 - increase in numbers and size of ships in the lower Fraser River, estuary, and narrow shipping lanes to the Pacific transporting LNG, jet fuel and US thermal coal
 - lowered river bed altering the salt wedge impacting river and shoreline habitats, fish habitat and adjacent farmlands
 - a deeper river leading to the loss of riparian marshes due to ship wake erosion and slippage of river banks into deeper waters.

The Government of Canada should immediately take action and order a Panel Review under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.

Susan Jones is co-chair of the Boundary Bay Conservation Committee. Together with her co-chair Mary Taitt, she was awarded Nature Vancouver's Frank Sanford Award for Community Service in 2008. Susan is a member of Nature Vancouver. Nature Vancouver has been represented on the Boundary Bay Conservation Committee for many years.