

Address to Delegates
Keepers of the Water: Watershed Gathering
Liidlii Kue/Fort Simpson, NT

September 6, 2006

First of all, I regret not being able to attend your gathering. I am committed to attending the New Democratic Party's policy convention this week in Quebec City.

My congratulations go out to all the delegates attending this most important occasion. Your recognition of the critical issues surrounding the North's main watershed in this overused global environment is heartening. To the organizers of the conference, especially the Dehcho First Nations and the Chiefs and Bands, your efforts here are well directed and timely. In the NWT, the Dehcho First Nations continue to provide idealistic and culturally-inspired leadership. This leadership is so valuable in the North right now, as we Northerners grapple with the complex and divisive issues of the preservation of our natural environment and the pressures of non renewable resource development.

Water is a key issue in the survival and future of the human species. The cycle of water in the environment, through the natural water courses, with the seasonal differences of flow rate, temperature, nutrients and aquatic life, have all been impacted by human activity. Our mighty watershed is made up of the Peace, Athabaska, Slave, Mackenzie, Liard and all the other rivers. Even though it is considered pristine by global standards, it has been significantly affected by mankind. Man's impact is felt in many ways. It is the seasonal alteration of flow patterns created by the province of British Columbia with its Bennett Dam in the mid 1960s, which still continues unchecked today. It is the accelerated pace of forestry, agriculture and oil and gas in northern Alberta with its use of diminishing river resources. It is the impact of regional, national and global air pollution, trapped in snow and run into the river systems in the spring. It is the increased demand of the Tarsands of Alberta on the Athabasca River. And above all, it shows the inevitable destructive changes on the aquatic system as the effects of Global Climate Change hit the Mackenzie Basin more than almost any other land area in the world.

More development than ever before is being planned right now for the Mackenzie Basin. Major multinational corporations, with the support of compliant Federal and Provincial governments, have targeted this region for more expansion of extractive industries, which rivals any other place in North America. The corporate agenda includes expanding the Tarsands by 500 per cent in 15 years, building a major gas industry in the NWT, developing more large-scale hydroelectric capacity, and turning the Nahanni watershed into a mineral

exploitation hotbed. The concepts of cumulative impact and development capacity of our watershed environment is not on industry or government agendas.

From 1990 to 1995, I served as the NWT representative on the governing board of the Northern River Basin Study. This study was the first detailed analysis which had been conducted on the upper basin area. It came as a result of increased public concern over pollution from the pulp and paper industry on the Peace and Athabasca Rivers. It was funded and supported by both levels of government and had Board representatives from the public, industry and aboriginal and public governments. The study was world class and advanced the scientific understanding of Northern rivers. The Board went on to create, through negotiation among the participants and the governments, many serious recommendations for the wise use of this valued system. Unfortunately, not much has come from these recommendations in the intervening decade.

The successor organization that was established to legitimize the inter-jurisdictional relationships needed to manage the watershed is the Mackenzie Basin Board. Both the Federal Government and the provinces represented on the Board have failed to make it work effectively. It is essential that this Board take on the role that it was intended to provide, and that all members of the Board be revitalized in the responsibility to protect the integrity of the whole Basin.

I am sure that your conference will establish a wide-ranging agenda to protect and maintain the ecological integrity of this incredible watershed. I look forward to the results of your efforts. In my role as Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic, I look forward to working with all participants in the future for the good of the environment.

Sincerely,

Dennis Bevington, MP
Western Arctic