

Environmental Impacts of Alberta's Vista Coal Mine Project: Waiting for the Decision

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Environmentalists are watching with great interest to see what Canada's Environment Minister Jonathan Wilkinson will decide, by July 30, about the Vista coal mine, a massive venture near Hinton, Alberta, owned by Coalspur, which is in turn owned by U.S. coal giant Cline Group.

Wilkinson is reconsidering a December 2019 decision to keep the federal government out of the approvals process for a major expansion of Vista. Recently, 47 NGOs published an Open Letter urging him to order a full federal assessment under the federal Impact Assessment Act (IAA).

The Open Letter addressed to Wilkinson states:

"Coalspur, the company behind the Vista mine, has not been straight with you or with the public. Last year, you declined to order an impact assessment based on the information that Coalspur provided. It has since come to light that they failed to disclose material facts about the size and scale of the mine. And it now appears that they have further expansion plans with the company now saying publicly that they want to increase their annual production to 20 million tonnes of coal per year. This new information warrants that you order a federal impact assessment." [1]

Currently, Vista is approved to extract about 6 million tonnes per year.

As Ecojustice's Sean O'Shea explained by email,

"Under the IAA a new mine 1/8th the size of Vista would have to be [federally] assessed because it is assumed that such a project has the potential to cause adverse impacts. However, an expansion to an existing mine does not have to be assessed if it is less than 50% the size of the original mine."

And that's where the information provided by Coalspur raised major questions.

Tweaking the Numbers

O'Shea told me,

"Coalspur has engaged in what's called 'project splitting' to try to avoid impact assessment for the Vista Mine expansion. Last year, Ecojustice flagged to the [Impact Assessment] Agency that the Vista Phase II expansion was likely to

surpass this 50% threshold. Coalspur responded by decreasing the size of its Phase II proposal.”

As The Narwhal has explained,

“The tweak [in size] meant the Impact Assessment Agency re-calculated that the Vista coal mine expansion ‘would result in an increase in the area of mining operations between 42.7 to 49.4 per cent,’ so it was just below the 50 per cent threshold.”[2]

On that basis, the federal government decided last December that the Vista expansion did not need federal assessment, and any concerns about harms to the environment and Indigenous peoples would be covered by a provincial assessment by Alberta Energy Regulator.

But, as Sean O’Shea explained to me,

“Less than two months later, Coalspur applied to the Alberta Energy Regulator for permits to engage in new underground mining activities on the Vista site. And publicly, Coalspur is now saying that they want to increase production even further from about 15 MT/year [million tonnes per year] to 20 MT/year.”

Ecojustice and others question Coalspur’s “technical and legal manoeuvres” to avoid federal assessment. On May 1, 2020 Ecojustice – on behalf of its clients Keepers of the Water, Keepers of the Athabasca, and the West Athabasca Watershed Bioregional Society – formally requested that Minister Wilkinson reconsider the decision, giving him 90 days to respond (by July 30).

Fraser Thomson, an Ecojustice lawyer, told The Energy Mix that

Wilkinson “has powers under the Impact Assessment Act reserved for exactly this kind of situation when a project slips through the cracks. Those powers are built into the Act as a safety net. So when you have a proposal for such a massive mine extracting one of the most dangerous commodities to our climate, it seems the Minister has to use these powers. If not now, when?” [3]

Thermal Coal

Vista is potentially one of the largest thermal coal mines on the continent. Thermal coal is low-grade coal largely used only for coal-fired electricity production, which is being phased out across Canada and in the U.S. Coalspur and its parent company Cline Group want to export Vista’s thermal coal to the Asian region.

U.S. coal billionaire Chris Cline bought the Vista mine in 2015 and considered it a necessary project with vast potential. As Cline told Forbes in 2017, “I think [Vista] could be the last mine operating after they’ve shut down all the rest of the coal in the world.” Vista began shipping coal for export in May 2019. Just a few months later, Cline died in a helicopter accident in July.

The Forbes 2017 profile stated:

“Cline thinks the carbon crusade is folly: ‘I’m all for getting sulfur and mercury and nitrogen oxide out of the air – that’s common sense,’ but ultimately, he posits, ‘global cooling’ will be a bigger threat. ‘I believe in our children’s lifetimes that they’ll wish they had paid us per ton to put more CO2 in the air’.” [4]

But that view is not widely shared, and coal companies have been in deep financial difficulty for several years.

As David Suzuki recently wrote,

“Coal isn’t coming back, nor should it. From start to finish, it’s one of the most destructive energy sources. Extracting it often requires blasting away entire mountaintops, polluting air, water and soil. Burning it creates enormous amounts of deadly pollution, along with CO2 and methane emissions that drive global heating.” [5]

Suzuki and others have noted an element of hypocrisy in Canada’s position. “Even though Canada is moving to phase out coal-fired electricity, we’re happy to export it to other countries,” he wrote. “It’s like a drug dealer who knows the harms of addiction, and so quits a personal habit but continues to sell to others.” [6]

The Open Letter to Minister Wilkinson states:

“As a founding member and co-chair of the ‘Powering Past Coal Alliance,’ Canada has led global efforts to phase out thermal coal and made this a cornerstone of its climate plan. Canada has committed up to \$275 million to the World Bank to help developing countries phase-out their dependence on traditional coal-fired power. The Vista mine expansion would undermine these efforts and harm Canada’s credibility as a climate leader in the run up to next year’s crucial climate conference in Glasgow. Canada can’t expect to be taken seriously in asking other countries to get off coal if we’re still willing to sell it to them.” [7]

Whatever the decision, Minister Wilkinson’s response will be very revealing.

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Notes

[1] Ecojustice.ca, “Open-letter: 47 groups urge Minister Wilkinson to act n Vista thermal coal mine,” July 2020.

[2] Sharon H, Riley, “Here’s what you need to know about the Vista mine, Alberta’s thermal coal project that ‘sidestepped’ a federal review,” The Narwhal, March 10, 2020.

[3] Mitchell Beer, "The Interview: Canada Mustn't Allow Vista Coal Mine Expansion Without Environmental Assessment, Thomson Says," The Energy Mix, July 9, 2020.

[4] Christopher Helman, "Chris Cline Could Be The Last Coal Tycoon Standing," Forbes, December 26, 2017.

[5] David Suzuki, "David Suzuki: Coal power should be relegated to the ash heap of history," The Georgia Straight, July 22, 2020.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ecojustice.ca, op cit.

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