

Green Scene: Pipeline construction in a Park?

by Elaine Golds

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A sure sign of spring at Colony Farm Park is when the beautiful mountain bluebirds arrive in March.

H. Maguire photo.

Let me be clear from the outset. I do not support projects that propose to accelerate tar sand extraction simply to ship diluted bitumen overseas for commercial profit. I am firmly in the camp of those who are very concerned about the state of the world we will pass on to future generations because of the devastating changes that will come from fossil-fuel induced climate change. However, I think my blanket opposition to such projects does not cloud my judgment that construction of a pipeline in a protected park is also wrong regardless of my views on the overall drawbacks of this project.

Kinder Morgan is proposing to use a significant portion of Colony Farm Regional Park as a construction site to assemble the length of pipe which will be drawn under the Fraser River. A road will have to be built beside this construction zone to allow truck traffic. Their proposed construction zone runs in a long curved

line through several fields, crosses Colony Farm Road and intrudes into a hedgerow planted as habitat compensation for airport construction several years ago. This pipeline will deliver diluted bitumen from Alberta to the Westridge Terminals on Burrard Inlet from where it will be shipped to markets overseas. This project is currently the subject of a Hearing being conducted by the National Energy Board. When, under harsh new regulations, applications for the public to participate in this Hearing closed in February, no one knew that Colony Farm Park would be proposed as a construction zone. Many people feel there is something inherently unfair about the elimination of opportunities to express concerns prior to full disclosure of project details.

It is also true that some people, such as engineers, tend to see Parks as simply open spaces, empty of buildings and therefore, I suppose, ready and available for their use. In fact, I have heard Kinder Morgan staff use just such terms to describe wildlife corridors along the Brunette River Greenway. “But, there’s nothing there”, sputtered one of their staff when I expressed concerns about impacts, adding “Well, just some trees”, as an afterthought.

No doubt, this is why it is especially hard to impress upon such people why “open” fields, which lack even trees, are actually full of wildlife not to mention agricultural potential. The fields at Colony Farm Park which Kinder Morgan proposes for their temporary use (for an unspecified period of time) are on the Coquitlam side of the River and lie mostly on the southwest side of Colony Farm Road. In addition to these fields at Colony Farm Park, Kinder Morgan also proposes to use a field which belongs to the Forensic Psychiatric Institute where the pipeline will actually go underground. This field, like all the fields at Colony Farm Park, lies within the Agricultural Land Reserve. Even with the changes currently under consideration for the Agricultural Land Reserve, an industrial construction project is not an allowed use of fertile fields.

When I asked how soil compaction (which destroys fertility) from truck traffic could possibly be avoided, I was assured the laying of geotextile fabric would do the trick. How a thin layer of plastic could possibly prevent heavy trucks from compacting the soil defies my understanding. Nor am I am sure their engineers have noticed all the ponding of water which occurs in some of these fields. As the gardeners at Colony Farm Park can tell you, waiting the soils to dry out each spring is a test to anyone’s patience.

Colony Farm Park is also a haven for wildlife. To date, over 200 species of birds have been identified as relying mainly on the open fields the Park offers as habitat. Many of these species are unusual for the lower mainland. They tend to be grassland species more commonly found in the interior of the province but ones that formerly relied on the considerable amount of such habitat once found where the Fraser River flows into the Salish Sea. One of these birds is the beautiful Lazuli bunting. Their favorite nesting sites are right in the area proposed to become a pipeline construction zone.

As it has been some time since these fields were used for agriculture, they have now converted naturally into a type of valuable habitat called “old field”. The tall grasses in these fields provide ideal habitat for meadow mice and voles. In turn, these small mammals attract raptors which prey upon them. Thus, Colony Farm offers outstanding viewing opportunities for hawks, owls and eagles. Several species at risk, including barn owls, short-eared owls, and great blue herons feed on the voles in these fields. Regardless of the season of the year, the old field habitat at Colony Farm Park is in continual use by dozens of wildlife species.

A responsible corporation should be doing all that it can to respect Park boundaries, protect biodiversity and preserve the agricultural capability of farm fields. To my mind, Kinder Morgan is failing on all three counts – and this doesn’t even include the impacts this project will have through increased greenhouse gas emissions.