

## GREEN SCENE

### How can impacts from PCT expansion be avoided?

by Elaine Golds

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While many people in Port Moody have probably heard the pile-driving going on for many weeks at the Pacific Coast Terminals (PCT) site along the south shore of Burrard Inlet, I think most residents remain unaware of the massive 10-storey building on the waterfront that will be the outcome. The new building will be a storage shed for potash to be shipped from PCT starting late next year. While I am pleased to see PCT shift from shipping coal to a more environmentally-benign product, I do feel the public consultation aspects of this project could have been improved.

The potash will come from a new mine near Moose Jaw, Sask., to be shipped overseas for use as fertilizer and industrial purposes. Shipping of sulphur is slowly decreasing because sulphur is a by-product of sour natural gas wells in Alberta and these wells are now reaching exhaustion. As a replacement product, potash seems like a good alternative. One problem with potash is that it must be kept dry as it is readily soluble in water and highly corrosive once it gets wet. Thus, a large new storage shed is required.

This building will be 264 m long and exceedingly high at its peak: 34 m.

No doubt, some people will consider it to be an eyesore on the waterfront; some will certainly have their waterfront views affected. The building will be painted a dark green to help it blend into the hillside and this will certainly help.

The immense size of this building was announced at a PCT public consultation session last September, when people were asked what colour they would like the building painted. But only a few people attended this meeting and, for many people, comprehending that a 34 m height is equivalent to a 10-storey building can be a challenge. Moreover, this was not explicitly stated at the meeting.

But while I am not thrilled at the thought of gazing at this new 160-million-tonne-capacity storage shed right on the waterfront, I am more concerned about impacts on the environment from this expansion. Because more rail cars will be coming into the facility, additional storage for empty rail cars will be required. To achieve this, PCT intends to expand its rail track into the intertidal and subtidal areas of the inlet all the way from the facility west to Reed Point Marina. This will result in the loss of a considerable amount of valuable shoreline and aquatic habitat.

The intertidal area is one of most important habitat types in the Inlet. These shallow areas are very productive in terms of food production so many fish forage in these areas; some species such as surf smelt and sand lance use this habitat for spawning. The new rail line will extend for a half a kilometre so

a considerable amount of habitat will be destroyed. Building into an area that is now part of the Inlet will require considerable rock and fill so PCT proposes to barge this material in.

To store this material, it proposes creating a storage site it calls “Reed Island” in Burrard Inlet close to the shoreline, where the track will be extended. During construction, the island will be connected to the shoreline so trucks can haul material from it. Once the work is completed, the connection to south side of the Inlet will be severed and the island, with its fish-unfriendly rip-rapped shores, will be left as “habitat compensation.”

Unfortunately, the subtidal area PCT has decided to bury appears to be a unique part of the ecosystem of Burrard Inlet. Studies conducted by the city of Port Moody and volunteers a few years ago discovered that while the area doomed to become an island represents only 3% of the subtidal mudflats in Port Moody Arm, it is the exact area where ocean-going coastal cutthroat are found 75% of the time.

Moreover, this is also the exact area where the largest and oldest pink sea stars in the world have been found, as well as unusually large gaper clams, velvet snails and a species of marine worm for which this area is the only known location in Canada.

Indeed, it would appear this particular subtidal area appears to be an especially significant portion of the ecosystem in Port Moody Arm. Somehow, all this documented information eluded PCT and its consultants when they undertook an environmental assessment. But they could have easily obtained this information simply by talking to volunteers at the Burrard Inlet Marine Enhancement Society. Sadly, as noted in its report on public consultation to Port Metro Vancouver, the only community group PCT bothered to consult with was the local Rotary Club.

People have been led astray by the fact that PCT’s project received “approval” from the federal Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans. Please keep in mind that, since the Stephen Harper government eviscerated the Fisheries Act in 2012, Fisheries and Oceans Canada officials are no longer allowed to protect fish habitat. With fish habitat protection now eliminated from the Act, officials are only permitted to “prohibit actions that would cause serious harm to fisheries.”

Fish habitat is something that can be seen, touched, measured and photographed; its loss is easily determined.

In contrast, “serious harm to fisheries” is an extremely vague concept that we could spend millions of dollars to have lawyers argue over in courts for years.

In other words, it is useless language unless your intention is to hoodwink the public.

In my view, we will continue to see projects come forward that will damage vital fish habitat until the federal Fisheries Act can be restored to once again allow fish habitat to be protected. Until then, we will witness one project after another that will nibble away at vital habitat until we will have hardly anything left. While PCT appears to be abiding by the new rules, it certainly could have done a vastly better job at public consultation.