

The buzz before Trans Mountain's boom is a serious policy gap

Canadians now own the pipeline. With that comes a responsibility to consider the opportunity costs of our national energy strategy.

The Federal Court of Appeal has spoken. Trans Mountain can move forward.

On Tuesday, the court [decided](#) against four Indigenous nations — the Coldwater Indian Band, Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Squamish Nation, and seven of the 11 bands of the Stó:lo Nation — which sought to halt the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project.

In an earlier [2018 decision](#), the court reversed the federal government's approval, ruling that Trans Mountain had not adequately consulted with Indigenous groups. That decision came shortly after the Trudeau government's purchase of Trans Mountain from Kinder Morgan, after the Texas oil giant threatened to abandon the pipeline. With Tuesday's decision, the court ruled that the additional consultations carried out addressed the shortcomings in the earlier process.

The decision brings Trans Mountain one more step forward. The expansion project will twin an existing pipeline and triple the oil flowing from Alberta to a terminal in Burnaby, B.C., and then on to Asian markets.

For seven years, diverse people across Canada have expressed concerns about the project. What will the impacts of a seven-fold increase in tanker traffic be on marine life? What are the risks of oil spills? What of unsettled issues of Indigenous title and sovereignty on the pipeline route?

A question that land defenders, pipeline protestors, policy makers,

politicians, and decision-makers rarely consider is, What have the impacts of Trans Mountain already been?

The project's story is familiar. A large corporation from somewhere else proposes to build a pipeline, a mine, or another resource development project. Everyone imagines possible futures. Hopes are for jobs and tax revenues. Fears are of environmental disaster, land dispossession, and social upheaval.

Nobody seems to worry about the impact of years of planning, consultation, negotiation, debate, and protest that come beforehand. All of this matters because unlike Trans Mountain, most projects never move forward to production. A cursory review of the [Canada Energy Regulator](#) website shows far more projects are abandoned than completed.

Meanwhile, many years of preparations can produce unexpected consequences for individuals, families, and communities. We have come to think of this period of resource extraction as the *buzz* phase.

Rightly, people are concerned about the environmental, health, and community impacts of natural resource development during the *boom* of operations. Some also think about the *bust* of a project's decline, along with the costs of cleanup. Few consider the impacts of a project during the buzz phase.

There is a lot that happens during the buzz phase. A massive amount of work and investment goes into launching a project, from geological surveys and feasibility studies to environmental impact assessments, permit applications, community consultation, and activist mobilization. All of this remains outside the scope of the impact assessment process.

The buzz draws attention to the myriad impacts of proposing a project. Far more than just abstract possibilities, the hopes and fears associated with resource economies produce real consequences for people living and

working in zones of extraction, transportation, and processing.

The buzz can create jobs, activities, and environmental interventions for exploration, assessment, and consultation. It can generate public debates and private conversations about the potential benefits and risks of a project or resource development in general. It can result in opportunity costs at various scales, from individuals to governments, as people make life choices and as decision-makers respond to a steady stream of project proposals. It can bring together people in solidarity, amplify community and interpersonal tensions, and result in stress and fear.

Once something is named, it can become an object of measurement, analysis, and policy. We draw attention to the buzz as an ignored phase of the extractive cycle, which presents a serious gap in public policy.

Canada introduced a new [Impact Assessment Act](#) in 2019. This represents significant progress towards a [cumulative effects](#) impact assessment of resource development projects by considering environmental, health, and social impacts together. To further support this regulatory process, the range of buzz impacts for individuals and communities should also be considered.

Trans Mountain is a pipeline now owned by all Canadians. With that comes a responsibility to consider the opportunity costs of a national energy strategy that continues to privilege hydrocarbons at the expense of more sustainable options. In the context of the ongoing buzz of so many projects, there is a need to imagine futures otherwise, in ways that acknowledge the global climate crisis.

Thinking about the buzz impacts suggests the need for dramatic shifts in policy and practice in order to create spaces for post-extractive futures. If ideas can be seeds for changes in action, the idea of the buzz phase of resource development projects can help to shift our collective energies.

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