

'Gagged' scientist's study may show hydro power as polluting as coal

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THE GAZETTE

When New York environmentalists were looking for evidence last month on the relationship between flooding for hydro-electric dams and global warming, they turned to a federal-government scientist in Winnipeg who is researching methane and carbon-dioxide production from man-made reservoirs.

But on the day the researcher, John Rudd, was due to leave to testify at a New York City hearing on the state's power contract with Hydro-Québec, his superiors at the Fisheries and Oceans Department told him to unpack his bags.

The order shocked Rudd's co-workers, and one said she thinks department officials silenced Rudd because they were scared his theories might stir up more controversy for Quebec's already beleaguered Great Whale project.

"They were just nervous," said Carol Kelly, an associate professor at the University of Manitoba's microbiology department. "They thought it would be better for somebody to say nothing rather than something that could cause controversy."

Hydro-Québec's \$17-billion export contract with New York, which is coming under increasing attack in the U.S., is apparently too

sensitive an issue for federal officials to get mixed up in, Kelly said in an interview from Winnipeg.

There is little doubt that Rudd's work has the potential of sparking great controversy, and torpedoing one of the American utilities' major arguments in favor of buying power from Quebec.

Although he did not want to discuss the order not to go to New York, Rudd described his research in an interview from Winnipeg.

In a five-year project, he and other researchers are creating an artificial reservoir in northwestern Ontario to study the release of methyl mercury and greenhouse gases into the environment after

flooding.

Rudd's hypothesis is that the peat in wetland areas slated for flooding in Hydro-Québec's James Bay 2 megaproject — similar to the test terrain in Ontario — will break down after flooding and release huge amounts of carbon dioxide and methane.

Scientists believe that when these gases accumulate in the atmosphere, they trap heat near the earth's surface and contribute to a gradual increase in global temperatures.

Judging from data gathered so far on gas emissions from ponds around James Bay, Rudd and Kelly

believe hydro-electric stations could contribute as much to global warming as coal-fired power stations. If this were true, it would destroy hydro power's image as a clean alternative to fossil fuels.

Final results from Rudd's study are not expected until 1996.

"What I was planning to do was say, 'We don't know,'" Rudd said. "And maybe because we don't know it would be worth waiting until we do know" to build more dams.

Mike McMullen, the regional director of science for Fisheries and Oceans in Central Canada, denied that political considerations had

anything to do with preventing Rudd from going to New York. Rudd had been invited to appear before New York City's environmental-protection committee on Sept 26.

"Dr. Rudd's project is really quite preliminary," McMullen said in an interview from Winnipeg. "He didn't have enough good, solid scientific evidence to add to the discussion going on there."

McMullen acknowledged, however, that it is very rare for one of the department's scientists to be told to clam up.

"No, it doesn't happen very often, or hardly ever," he said.