



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS  
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

**Policy Brief:**  
**Building Trust Between Manitoba Hydro and Grand  
Rapids**  
*A Hydro- impacted community*

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## ISSUE AND EVIDENCE

Manitoba Hydro's development projects have adversely affected the spiritual, physical, and mental wellness of Indigenous people for decades by disrupting their connection with the land and ways of life. Grand Rapids, Manitoba provides an example of how Indigenous communities are affected by hydro- electric projects as well as climate change. The construction of the dam and Generating Station in Grand Rapids has meant the disappearance of the very rapids that the community is named after, and which sustained the Cree people.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, many Hydro- impacted communities have not been provided with subsidized hydro- electric bills, and instead are faced with extremely high costs,<sup>2</sup> while Manitoba Hydro personnel working in northern communities benefit from subsidized housing costs and northern allowance.<sup>3</sup>

Grand Rapids relies on a primarily resource- based economy of fishing and trapping, while the on- reserve population relies on social assistance for a variety of needs.<sup>4</sup> As a result of hydro- electric activity, the Lake Sturgeon population has significantly declined,<sup>5</sup> and cooler water fish species in Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River are expected to follow this

<sup>1</sup> Peter Kulchyski, Ramona Neckoway, Gerald McKay, and Robert Buck, "The Town That Lost Its Name: The Impact of Hydroelectric Development on Grand Rapids," *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, (August 2006), p. 1-6, 8- 13, [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba\\_Pubs/2006/Grand\\_Rapids.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba_Pubs/2006/Grand_Rapids.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Barghout, "Manitoba 'Hydro Justice' Rally Gains Support on Heels of Board Resignations," *CBC News*, (March 22, 2018), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-hydro-justice-rally-1.4589155>.

<sup>3</sup> Manitoba Hydro, Northern Employee Benefits, <https://www.hydro.mb.ca/careers/benefits/#north>

<sup>4</sup> Becky Cook, *Misipawistik Cree Nation Climate Change and Health Report 2019*, Issue brief, Misipawistik Cree Nation, (2019), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Lake Sturgeon in Manitoba: A Summary of Current Knowledge*. Publication, Manitoba Hydro, (2016), p. 11, [https://www.hydro.mb.ca/environment/pdf/lake\\_sturgeon\\_summary.pdf](https://www.hydro.mb.ca/environment/pdf/lake_sturgeon_summary.pdf).

trend as a result of climate change. Run-off from fields in the south, invasive species, algae and garbage in the lake, and increased use of the spillway are a few of the community's concerns.<sup>6</sup>

While the current licensing agreement and the Settlement Agreement of 1991 requires Manitoba Hydro to inform local residents of any potential decision-making which will have further impact on the community,<sup>7</sup> this has often been disregarded. In January of 2019, Manitoba Hydro began implementing new surveillance, lighting, and fencing in preparation for the automation of the Generating Station in Grand Rapids without informing or consulting with local residents. Automation would involve restricting access to sacred burial grounds and leaving the Generating Station without monitoring personnel during evenings and overnight.<sup>8</sup>

While automation has been successful in other Manitoban communities, Grand Rapids is the only community located within only one kilometre of the dam.<sup>9</sup> If the dam were to breach overnight without personnel onsite, this could rapidly result in severe flooding, injury, and potentially deaths. Manitoba Hydro has failed to provide or fund a community emergency evacuation plan, but asked the community to implement one, after the automation plan was discovered. It was also learned through a test alert that the evacuation siren sound cannot be heard in all parts of the community, and therefore would be ineffective during an emergency.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cook, *Misipawistik Cree Nation Climate Change and Health Report 2019*, (2019), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Manitoba Hydro Crown Corporation, *The Agreement Between Grand Rapids First Nation and Manitoba Hydro-Electric Board*, (December 5, 1991), p. 18, [https://www.hydro.mb.ca/community/indigenous\\_relations/pdf/grand-rapids-settlement-1991.pdf](https://www.hydro.mb.ca/community/indigenous_relations/pdf/grand-rapids-settlement-1991.pdf); Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, *C.C.S.M. C. H190 The Manitoba Hydro Act*, 2019, (June 3, 2019), <https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/h190e.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Shane Gibson, "'We Need to Be Informed': Automation at Grand Rapids Dam Worries Residents," *CBC News*, (May 12, 2019), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/grand-rapids-dam-automation-1.5132855>.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, *Misipawistik Cree Nation Climate Change and Health Report 2019*, (2019), p.2.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Kavanagh, "Grand Rapids Residents March to Manitoba Hydro Generating Station to Protest Automation Social Sharing," *CBC News*, (June 10, 2019), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-hydro-grand-rapids-automation-1.5169127>.

The Grand Rapids community organized a petition and protest against the automation. After this resulted in the scheduling of a meeting with Manitoba Hydro, Hydro took credit for arranging this meeting. There were reportedly no board members or decision-makers from Manitoba Hydro present at the meeting, and rather than consulting with community members, Hydro workers attempted to persuade the community members to accept the automation.

This lack of trust can be addressed by finding common ground on the issue of climate action. While Manitoba Hydro's work has been detrimental to the environment, they have also been committed since the mid-nineties to adapting their policies and practices to reduce impact where possible.<sup>11</sup> The next step is fully including hydro-impacted communities in this process, and providing funding for Indigenous peoples to take the lead on environmental issues.

## **STAKEHOLDERS**

The Grand Rapids community is not being informed or consulted with by Manitoba Hydro on issues of socio-economic importance and faces bureaucratic challenges when trying to communicate with Hydro. The federal and provincial governments, along with the Manitoba Hydro Board of Directors, and workers make up the core decision-making body in this relationship.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Manitoba Hydro Board of Directors should offer an apology to the community, suspend any action that will restrict access to sacred burial grounds, and reverse the decision to

<sup>11</sup> *Climate Change Strategy Report*, Environment, Manitoba Hydro, [https://www.hydro.mb.ca/environment/pdf/lake\\_sturgeon\\_summary.pdf](https://www.hydro.mb.ca/environment/pdf/lake_sturgeon_summary.pdf).

leave the Generating Station unmonitored in the evenings and overnight. They should commit their representatives to participating in monthly, rather than yearly consultative meetings with community representatives. They should re- commit to informing and consulting with residents in regard to any impending decision- making which may have further impact on the community.

Manitoba Hydro should continue to provide funding for community- based environmental research and monitoring work, and partner with the Guardians Programs to provide long- term, stable funding, including for youth employment. They should also partner with Misipawistik's Land- Based Learning Program to facilitate workshops about climate change and their work.

Finally, they should require that all northern employees participate in training led by hired local residents regarding history and connection to the land. They should Include Indigenous knowledge and local monitoring reports (with full recognition for these contributions) in their Sustainable Development and Climate Change Strategy reports to demonstrate that they value Indigenous knowledge in climate action.

The Province of Manitoba should commission an independent, credible body to conduct a review of Manitoba Hydro's environmental and social impacts within Indigenous communities with the intent of providing any policy alternatives. These reviews should be completed prior to finalizing license renewals and should be published in a final report for increased transparency. They should also share water rental payments received from Hydro with Hydro- impacted communities.

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