

DO EAO RESTRICTIONS ON CONSTRUCTION WORKERS STIGMATIZE A VITAL WORKFORCE?

The EAO introduces unprecedented conditions to address concerns over potential violence in town

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It is widely understood that in our society, as the province of B.C. recently put it, “Indigenous women and girls, immigrants and newcomers, racialized people, transgender, gender-diverse people and others in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, as well as those with disabilities, are especially targeted with violence.”

Some previous studies bear out this understanding when it comes to some industrial work camps.

In response to vocal concerns about the potential increased threat of violence in Squamish due to the arrival of about 1,200 construction workers for the Woodfibre LNG project and the associated FortisBC Eagle Mountain to WoodfibreLNG Pipeline, the Environment Assessment Office (EAO) imposed conditions for the operation of both the Woodfibre LNG floatel and work camp lodge for the pipeline.

The conditions the EAO—a neutral regulatory agency within B.C.’s provincial government—has imposed on WLNG’s ship-based worker accommodations, or floatel, are a first of their kind.

When operational, the floatel should house about 600 workers.

The regulator confirmed that the floatel condition is the first time the EAO has introduced a specific requirement that restricts worker access and travel by employees into a community by boat for non-work-related purposes while living on-site at a project.

But does this condition and others imposed that are set to protect the community, go too far and unfairly stigmatize construction workers?

STIGMATIZING LABOURERS?

Ryan Bruce, B.C. manager of government relations CLAC (Christian Labour Association of Canada), a national union representing over 60,000 workers, told The Squamish Chief that not all experiences with industrial workers are bad, which seems to be the impression given through these measures.

“There’s examples out there, Kitimat being one of them. It’s the largest private sector investment in the community in its history—thousands of workers in a small community,” he said.

“While there were concerns as well, early on, the experience has been pretty positive.”

Bruce said he is concerned the EAO is “painting everybody with the same brush” and called the restriction to not allow floatel workers

to come to town “heavy-handed.”

The restrictions fly in the face of what those in the trades have been trying to do in recent years, which is to increase the profile of working in the trades. It is a viable career choice for a diverse group of people, he said.

“What we’ve been trying to do for the last number of years is build up the esteem of the trades because we recognize that there’s a huge challenge [with] a shortage of workers who are available to build projects, build roads, transportation, infrastructure, that we all need,” he said.

“What we’ve been really trying to do is, is help portray the trades as an honourable job that you can earn a living and raise your family and contribute to your communities and do all the things that everyone loves to do in life—and live and play and work. And so this just totally goes against the grain in terms of what we really ought to be doing. And that is actually raising the trades in people’s minds as a great career, great job.”

He said while the industry is not perfect and has some work still to do on its culture, it has come a long way, and that doesn’t seem to be recognized in the EAO’s restrictions.

“There’s a big push to encourage women to get into trades and workplaces, while they’re not perfect, yet—there’s still work to do—they’ve come a long way from where they were even just five or six years ago in being more inclusive. And so, again, this is sort of like spinning the wheel in the wrong direction suddenly, when it comes to attracting underrepresented groups to construction that we need.”

And the trades are skilled jobs that build our society, he said.

Bruce stressed that he does not minimize the valid concerns of those who fear the influx of workers, but said there are better ways of mitigating that than banning the workers altogether.

“I think those fears exist. And let’s talk about that. And let’s share some examples of what has happened elsewhere, like in Kitimat for example, and share some positive stories out there.”

He said there are now strict codes of conduct at job sites and on-boarding that lays out very clearly what is expected from workers. There are also mental health resources and the like.

Bruce added that there are already 76 CLAC construction workers who live in Squamish.

There are many from other unions or companies that live in town, he said.

“They’re already living there. They are already amongst you.”

Bruce added that it seems in today’s economy

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that the EAO and the town are discouraging the economic benefits of a well-paid workforce coming for dinner or to buy gear at retailers.

RESTRICTIONS IN RESPONSE TO CONCERNS

The EAO says that the restrictions were put in place because the organization was listening to the community’s concerns.

“The EAO worked closely with Squamish Nation to develop the new requirements for the Woodfibre LNG facility work camp. The EAO also heard from the District of Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh Nation and grassroots organizations like PearlSpace—formerly Howe Sound Women’s Centre Society—to incorporate their input,” the EAO spokesperson said. “The floating work camp will include facilities to support workers’ health and wellness. Workers will be ferried from a designated location in the Lower Mainland to the camp directly to work on the project and back.

The spokesperson said that the various work camps across the province have their own requirements, including some imposed by the employer and others by other provincial regulators.

WOODFIBRE LNG

Woodfibre LNG told The Squamish Chief that for most construction workers, work is expected to be on 14-day shift rotations.

Sean Beardow, spokesperson for Woodfibre LNG, said the company “remains committed to hiring locally wherever possible.”



PHOTO BY LJUBAPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Ryan Bruce, B.C. manager of government relations CLAC is concerned restrictions on workers in place for Woodfibre may stigmatize the skilled blue collar workers.

Local workers will travel to the job site daily by water taxi, he said.

The company has leased a 65-unit apartment complex in Squamish, which will be used to accommodate designated project management staff.

Beardow said the Woodfibre LNG project workforce on the floatel will have “exceptional on-board accommodation, food, recreation options and seminar programming—and no commute time to work.”

“While staying on a floatel is unique compared to a standard work camp, many major projects have on-site workforce accommodations and these arrangements are familiar for the craft workforce that will build the Woodfibre LNG facility,” he said.

“Woodfibre LNG and project regulators have worked to carefully mitigate impacts on and concerns expressed by the community. Regulation establishes that the non-local workforce—excluding designated managerial

staff authorized to live in the leased apartment facility—can have no access to the community of Squamish during their work rotation, except in an emergency such as a requirement for medical care beyond the scope of services available on board.”

The company and its contractor and subcontractors will comply with all regulatory conditions, Beardow said. Site access security procedures will apply for all workers, and water taxi service would not be provided for non-essential or recreational purposes, he added.

“A key focus of the floatel will be providing a safe and welcoming on-board environment for workers of all backgrounds, including Indigenous women.”

Locally hired Indigenous workers would continue to live in Squamish, he said.

A TEMPLATE GOING FORWARD?

Asked if the conditions imposed on Woodfibre LNG would be a template for other worker accommodation approvals going forward in B.C., the EAO spokesperson said this situation was unique and the regulatory body took into consideration the level of concern about it in the community.

“Each project presents its own unique challenges and concerns. For the Woodfibre LNG project, the EAO heard considerable concern from the advisory committee and the community about the potential effects of the work camp on the District of Squamish, given the project’s proximity to the small town,” the

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spokesperson said.

“The Environmental Assessment Office would consider similar requirements for other projects to address adverse impacts from a project where the circumstances warranted it, but this would be very much dependent on the specific circumstances and what we hear from the community, First Nations, advisory committee for the project assessment and others who may be impacted.”

The Squamish Chief asked if the restrictions put in place for the floatel have the potential to make the skilled labourers feel like they are viewed as possible predators, thus impacting their mental health.

To this, the EAO said that it is not uncommon for workers not to access communities if their camps are remote.

“Large work camps like the one planned for the Woodfibre LNG project are common and are often in remote locations without access to a nearby community, so restricting access is similar to such circumstances,” the EAO spokesperson said. “The requirements the EAO has imposed as part of approving the plans for the expanded work camp include a number of measures to support workers’ health and well-being at the camp such as medical staff, mental health and addiction support services as well as leisure and physical fitness facilities.”

DIVERSITY?

The EAO says that the restrictions shouldn’t be a deterrent for workers from diverse communities from applying to work on this project.

“Woodfibre LNG must have a Gender Safety Advisory Committee in place and mandatory training with annual refresher courses is required for all staff,” the EAO spokesperson said. “Senior personnel also must receive additional training to effectively support workers who disclose instances of workplace violence, sexual harassment or abuse.”

There are also exceptions to the requirement to live in the work camp for extenuating circumstances, which may include place of residence being in the Sea-to-Sky Corridor, or Indigenous and cultural considerations.

Ultimately, the EAO said it is proud of its collaborative work to create the conditions.

“A key interest for everyone involved was to mitigate the potential impacts of the worker accommodation on local communities, particularly Indigenous women and girls. This

is the first time the EAO has required a gender and cultural safety plan, which is set to become standard practice for future projects with large work camps assessed by the EAO,” the spokesperson said.

“We are proud of this work, which supports our mandate to reduce the impacts from major projects on the health and social fabric of local communities and on First Nations. These new requirements also support B.C.’s Gender-based Violence Action Plan, just released this week, and are a concrete example of how the EAO can help address the issue of gendered violence.”

FORTISBC

Recently, the EAO and Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) have approved FortisBC’s application to increase its workforce lodge footprint for the Eagle Mountain -Woodfibre Gas Pipeline (EGP) Project.

The lodge is planned to be located on Mamquam River Forest Service Road.

Submitted as an amendment to existing environmental approvals from both the EAO and Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw, the lodge will house an average of 300 workers throughout the project, with numbers peaking at approximately 600 workers in the summer of 2025.

“This five-hectare increase enables us to house non-local workers in the Squamish-area at the lodge site, which directly responds to community feedback on reducing pressure on local housing, services, and traffic,” wrote spokesperson Jessica Skjeveland, corporate communications advisor for FortisBC in an email to The Squamish Chief.

“As a condition of EAO approval, all non-local workers in Squamish must stay at the lodge, except under certain conditions.”

“As another condition of approval, FortisBC has taken early steps towards establishing a Gender and Cultural Safety Plan, which will be developed in consultation with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw, the District of Squamish and səlílŋwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation,” Skjeveland said.

OTHER STEPS

Other steps FortisBC will take to “support the safety of vulnerable peoples and the broader community” include:

- A Worker Code of Conduct. Workers found to be in breach of this code will be removed from the pipeline work site;
- Mandatory cultural awareness orientation, including on topics regarding harassment and bullying;

- A Nation Elder in residence at the lodge;
- Prohibiting the possession, consumption, or distribution of intoxicants of any kind by a worker on, or when travelling to or from, an EGP project site;
- 24-hour security and no unauthorized visitors;
- Regular communication with Indigenous nations, stakeholders and the public to collect feedback and address concerns;
- Ensuring a focus on mental health, both through health and wellness programming and social and recreational offerings at the lodge;
- A confidential 24/7 reporting line for residents to bring forward concerns of worker behaviour in the community. A separate confidential line will be provided for residents of the lodge to bring forward concerns of bullying or harassment.

The final step before lodge construction is to secure a Temporary Use Permit from the District.

FortisBC applied for this permit in December of 2022, and anticipates a decision from the municipality in early 2024. The public will have an opportunity to comment on the TUP application before council makes a decision.

INCONSISTENCY?

Asked if there is an inconsistency in the requirements for the Woodfibre LNG floatel versus the FortisBC work camp, the spokesperson for the EAO said that the two camps were different enough to require different rules.

“As a pipeline spanning almost 50 kilometres, is quite a different type of project from the Woodfibre LNG plant,” the EAO spokesperson said.

On Dec. 4, 2023, the Environmental Assessment Office approved changes to the planned work camp for the Eagle Mountain - Woodfibre Gas Pipeline with a new requirement for workers to reside in the camp during construction, unless they live in Metro Vancouver already.

“[This] is also intended to reduce impacts on nearby communities,” the spokesperson said.

As a condition of its approval for the expanded work camp, the EAO is also requiring FortisBC to pro-actively address harassment and violence at the camp, including gender-based violence, for all employees.