



J. Conner, 4 December 1997

North Fork Coal, 1997

This map shows the approximate location of current mineral claims and most coal licenses in the British Columbian section of the North Fork Flathead River basin. Not shown are unplotted (by the B.C. government) coal licenses in the vicinity of Harvey Creek. Fording Coal LTD holds the Lodgepole, Harvey, and all but two of the Lilyburt licenses. Sage Creek Coal LTD still holds the Cabin Creek licenses. Fording's recent exploration was on the Lodgepole licenses.

The base map was produced by the International

Joint Commission's Flathead River Study. I overlaid onto the base map the salient parts of a coal license and mineral claims map that was produced by the provincial mining authorities in British Columbia. The overlay is not registered perfectly, but is accurate enough for the purpose of identifying general license locations.

Additional information is available on the North Fork Flathead River Basin Coal Mining Information Center, at <http://www.digisys.net/highwater/Coal/coalhome.html> on the internet.

Coal Miners Return to Upper North Fork Flathead

KALISPELL, MT, 3 DEC 97. Fording Coal Limited, Canada's largest coal mining company, is investigating the possibility of developing coal licenses in the Flathead Coalfield near the North Fork Flathead River¹ in British Columbia (shown on the map).

The Flathead is the southernmost coalfield in BC's rich East Kootenay Coalfields. Metallurgical quality bituminous coal is mined in this

Experts Comment

Jack Potter, Glacier's assistant chief ranger: "The bombshell is that nobody knew this had been reopened up there. If you thought that coal mining in the North Fork was dead, you'd better think again. It's back. The potential for large-scale pollution is real again, and it all flows downstream." *Missoulian*, 13 November 1997.

Bob Cyr, Fording Coal's chief mine engineer: "Our plans are straightforward. We will try to be good neighbors. But we intend to stay in this business a long time, and that means long-term planning and identifying possible resource sites for the future." *Missoulian*, 13 November 1997.

Rich Moy, chief of the water management bureau of the Montana Department of Natural Resources: "This is a scary thing. This is a significant threat, and what's unique and what's attractive and what's special about this area could be destroyed.

"The threat is unacceptable. The people who live in this area need to tell British Columbia, 'Hey, this is a unique area and we want 'to protect it.'" *Missoulian*, 13 November 1997.

British Columbia Ministry of Employment and Investment: "Coal mining is an important part of the British Columbia Economy and coal is the province's second most important export commodity...It accounts for about six percent of all exports and has a value of about \$1.7 billion [Canadian] in 1996.

"The East Kootenay Coalfields comprise three separate fields extending from the Montana border northward and known respectively as [the] Flathead, Crowsnest, and Elk Valley coalfields. These are the most important coalfields of the province, having produced over 360 million tonnes of mainly metallurgical coal since 1898...All the coal mined from the five open-pit mines in the East Kootenay coalfields is exported."

region, thus far in the Elk River valley and Crowsnest Pass region, and exported, mainly to Japan and Korea. Coal exports accounted for 6-7.5 percent of BC's exports in 1996, making it second in economic importance to timber exports.

Fording's North Fork licenses are on crown land north of the Cabin Creek licenses, on which a coal mine was proposed 20 years ago. Fording has drilled test holes on its Lodgepole licenses and is determining the extent and potential profitability of its holdings. This activity is exploration, not development, but it is the first step in a process that could lead to mining. At this point, the time frame for potential development is uncertain, but efforts to mine the area could shift into high gear in five years, perhaps sooner, depending on market and regulatory factors.

The North Fork Flathead Valley in BC is virtually devoid of human habitation. The heavily timbered (and heavily logged) terrain is steep and wet, receiving much more rain and snow than the high plains coal mining regions of eastern Montana and Wyoming. There are heavy concentrations of grizzly bears and gray wolves, respectively listed as threatened and endangered in the U.S. North Fork tributaries such as Howell Creek support significant populations of bull trout, expected to be listed as a threatened or endangered species in the US.

In the 1970s, Sage Creek Coal, a subsidiary of mining giant Rio Algom, proposed massive open pit mining on its coal licenses near two tributaries of the North Fork, Cabin and Howell Creeks, just six miles north of the border. The Cabin Creek mine was not developed, but the proposal generated enormous concern in Montana's Flathead Basin, which borders on Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, and which feeds Flathead Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River.

The Cabin Creek issue was submitted to the International Joint Commission, established by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to address transboundary water quality issues. Senator Max Baucus's tireless efforts to protect water quality in the Flathead River Basin were a major reason that the IJC accepted the reference and established the Flathead River International Study. Baucus also secured funding for the definitive five-year Flathead River Basin Environmental Impact Study, which established baseline values for water quality and related attributes in the basin. Subsequent to the FRBEIS's completion, the State of Montana established the Flathead Basin Commission.

The IJC completed its work in the early 1990s. The FRIS's Biological Resources Committee's Technical Report, completed in October, 1987, but released several years later, concluded that:

"The direct effects of the proposed mine on biological resources in the Flathead drainage would be highly detrimental at the mine site, slightly detrimental at the International Boundary, and negligible near Flathead Lake. *Migratory fish populations, important to the entire Flathead Lake/River system, would experience significant long-term population declines because of severe damage to spawning and rearing habitat in the vicinity of the mine.*" (Italics added.)

The Cabin Creek mine never was dug, an unfavorable market for coal being a major, perhaps controlling, factor in the decision not to fire up the shovels and trucks. Sage Creek has not abandoned its licenses, however, and could well take another look at the project if markets improve — especially if Fording digs first and establishes such infrastructure elements as high voltage power lines and paved haul roads to railway loading depots in the Elk Valley.

Since the Cabin Creek mine was proposed, the North Fork has been designated a Scenic River and Glacier National Park has become a World Heritage Site. There is no reason to believe that the impacts of large scale open pit mining in the North Fork Flathead drainage in BC would be any less severe, or any more acceptable, today than they would have been two decades ago.

Fording operates three of the five mines in the East Kootenay: the Coal Mountain Colliery in the Crowsnest coalfield; and the Fording River and Greenhills mines in the Elk Valley coalfield. In 1996, Coal Mountain produced 1.8 million tonnes, Fording River 7.8 million tonnes, and Greenhills 4.2 million tonnes. The Cabin Creek mine in the Flathead coalfield would have produced 5 millions tonnes a year. Fording is a wholly owned subsidiary of Canadian Pacific LTD, a huge and powerful corporation that also owns the Canadian Pacific Railway, hotels, an ocean shipping company, and has a part ownership in oil and gas developments. *James Conner.*

¹ Names of familiar features change when one crosses the 49th parallel. In British Columbia, the Whitefish Range is known as the MacDonald Range, and the North Fork Flathead River is called the Flathead River.