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**Farmer still fighting for his ideals**

**Driving change** | Nick Parsons drove his combine from B.C. to Ottawa to highlight agricultural issues

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CAMROSE BUREAU

FARMINGTON, B.C. — British

Columbia farmer and activist Nick Parsons may have parked his combine, but he hasn't stopped the protest.

The farmer who drove his combine from northern B.C. to Victoria in 1998 and to Ottawa in 2000 to raise awareness of the struggles of farmers has turned his attention to stopping BC Hydro's Site C dam on the Peace River.

"I feel so strongly about this valley and river that I would put my neck on the line," said Parsons.

Talk of building a third hydroelectric dam on the Peace River, next to Parsons' farm, has been discussed in B.C.'s Peace River region since he

emigrated from England 20 years ago. This time, the possibility of construction appears real.

“Stopping the dam is the most important thing in my life today. It’s more important than anything else. I believe it is so wrong,” said Parsons, who considers the Peace River one of the most beautiful spots in Canada with its rugged hills and slow moving water.

“You cannot put a value on the loss of a beautiful valley.... What are our descendents going to think of that mess? It’s destruction beyond imagination.”

Slightly more than 63,000 people live in B.C.’s Peace River area, and Parsons believes Site C would not be allowed if the Peace River was in the more populated south.

“We’re a small group of people up here in the north. The perception in Vancouver is that this is almost permafrost up here.”

The Peace River region is rugged, but its long days and river valley microclimate means fields along the river are capable of growing a wide variety of crops, from watermelon to corn. With growing concerns about food security, Parsons believes it would be short sighted to flood the few areas in northern B.C. capable of growing long season fruits and vegetables.

“I think the time will come when food from down south will not be as readily available as it is today. I think we have to be semi sustainable.”

Parsons believes the loss of good land for 100 years of electricity is a short-sighted political move that needs to be stopped.

“In the length of this world, that’s just a blink and they’re willing to sacrifice all this beautiful land and the valley and all that goes with it

just for 100 years of electricity.”

BC Hydro estimates the dam would be a source of clean, reliable, cost-effective electricity for more than 100 years. It’s estimated the dam would provide enough energy to power the equivalent of 450,000 homes per year in B.C.

With a natural gas boom in northern B.C. and new technological leaps, Parsons believes the government and BC Hydro should be looking at other ways to generate electricity rather than putting a third dam on the Peace River.

For Parsons, stopping the Site C dam has the same value as his farm.

“My energy would be 50 percent the farm and 50 percent toward saving the valley.”

Parsons’ determination became known across Canada when he drove his Massey Ferguson 860 combine, the Prairie Belle, from northern B.C. to Ottawa to raise awareness of the tough times in agriculture.

Like other farm families, the Parsons almost lost the farm in 2000 after a series of bad crops from excess rain and low grain prices. With nothing to lose and plenty of attention focused on agriculture, Parsons set off for Ottawa in the combine.

Looking back, Parsons believes his 4,000 kilometre trip made a difference to agriculture. Once he left the Peace River area and headed east, the combine was always filled with fuel by strangers and he was given food and lodging along the way. More importantly, he was constantly thanked, hugged or given a handshake by other farmers.

“The support I had has to be the number one memory,” he said.

“You were never alone, especially

when they know you're trying to help the industry."

As Parsons got closer to Ottawa, the possibility of meeting prime minister Jean Chretien seemed remote. There seemed to be a lack of awareness of agriculture troubles in the capital, he added.

In the end, it was Liberal MP Wayne Easter who arranged for Parsons to have a drink with Chretien at 24 Sussex Drive.

"He thanked me for going and thanked me for doing what I was doing," Parsons said about Chretien.

His trip may have made a difference.

The following year, the federal and provincial agriculture ministers met in Whitehorse to sign the agriculture policy framework agreement.

Parsons' Prairie Belle found a permanent home at a museum in Wadena, Sask.

In 2009, a newer combine, the Peace Valley Rose, was driven around the Peace River area to protest the Site C dam. That combine has also been retired and is kept at Ken and Arlene Boon's farm outside Fort St. John.

The combine harvests crops that help fund the Site C protest.

Parsons said it's hard to tell if his combine trips made an impact on agriculture or will stop construction of the dam.

"I don't know if it works or not. I hope it works. I don't know."

He sold some of his land a few years ago and became debt free.

With only 500 acres to seed and harvest, Parsons is free to devote time to opposing the Site C project and running his farm with little stress.

"As long as my health remains good, I plan to just carry on my 500 acres and do the best I can with my old equipment. The days are gone

when I yearn to buy something new.  
Once you start buying, you're on a  
treadmill," he said.

"I don't want to be a rich man. You  
haven't got to be a rich man in this  
world to be a good man."