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Cascadia Reconsidered: Questioning Micro-scale Cross-border Integration in the Fraser Lowland

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Abstract
Cascadia has been promoted as the premier cross-border region (CBR) along the western US-Canada border. However, most studies of this CBR have a strong normative inflection that assumes a great desire by the actors to emancipate themselves from dominance by the nation-state. Unlike as in other regions of the world such as Europe, little micro-level empirical investigation has been done of this hypothesis. This study seeks to address that issue by focusing on a proposed power plant in the heart of Cascadia which was to integrate resources and services between the border towns of Sumas, Washington and Abbotsford, British Columbia which lie at the western end of the enclosed Fraser Lowland. After an initial agreement between the towns collapsed based mainly on grassroots opposition concerned over impacts on the shared air shed, the two cities found themselves at loggerheads ever more willing to appeal to more distant political levels to support their case. This eventually resulted in a move by the Canadian National Energy Board to favour Canadian environmental interests over US economic ones, an apparent move to reaffirm the border as a shield. The paper explores how the micro-scale relationship that emerges from this dispute fits into the emerging discussion on CBRs and more importantly what this failed attempt at cross-border integration in the Fraser Lowland tells us about Cascadia as whole.

Introduction
Cascadia has been promoted as the premier cross-border region (CBR) along the western US-Canada border for the last two decades (McCloskey, 1988). However, much as Perkmann has noted in Europe “… a considerable part of the literature [on CBRs] has strong normative inflections, arguing that by cooperating with their cross-border counterparts, local and regional communities can emancipate themselves vis-à-vis nation-state dominance” (2003, p. 153). What is missing in this discussion is the inclusion of empirical studies, especially at the micro scale to evaluate such hypotheses. Perkmann is able to address this situation by drawing on a wealth of such studies in Europe — here in Cascadia a paucity of such data exists. We seek to right this situation in Cascadia by
providing one such study where the issue of relying on local versus national agency is central to a cross-border issue. We then use this study to shed light on how the relationship that emerges at the micro level supports the Cascadian hypothesis of growing cross-border cooperation both at the micro level where it occurs and across the wider Cascadian region. The Fraser Lowland area is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Fraser Lowland

In 1999, Sumas Energy 2, Inc (SE2), a wholly owned subsidiary of National Energy Systems Co. (NESCO) of Kirkland, Washington (WA), proposed to build a 660-megawatt natural-gas-fired electric generator facility in Sumas, WA. Sumas is a small (population 960), economically depressed town on the Canadian border located in Whatcom County directly across from the much larger Abbotsford, British Columbia (BC) (population 124,000). SE2 was sited in an open area a few hundred meters west of Sumas city hall, which itself is located on the city’s declining retail thoroughfare. The plant’s site was also nearly an equal distance south of the Canadian border, about half a kilometre. Hard pressed for employment and income, largely due to the collapse of cross-border shopping in the early 1990s, for several years Sumas had been searching for a
niche in the emerging continental NAFTA economy to rescue it from its boom-bust cycles and peripheral US location. The proposal by NESCO, a US power giant, to use Canadian natural gas that flowed just across the border from Sumas to produce relatively clean electricity for shipment to growing southern markets (perhaps even as far south as Mexico) seemed like an exemplar of how the new continental economy in general and Cascadia in particular should work. The proposal relied on linking to the Canadian electricity grid, whose cables were a convenient eight kilometres north. In addition, it initially had a tentative agreement to buy water from nitrogen contaminated wells in Abbotsford and to recycle the effluent back across the border into Abbotsford’s treatment plant. Economic benefits looked promising to all sides. Despite the projection of a rather modest plant workforce (under 30 jobs), its 2 million dollar tax base could go a long way to compensating for the decline in cross-border shopping.

Today, nine years after it was first proposed, after cross-border grassroots environmental groups on each side of the border initiated the opposition, after the mayor of Abbotsford was turned out of office, and after numerous hearings and heated public debate, the project is dead. What went wrong? Or, depending on your perspective, what went right? Opposition to the plant centered on its impact on regional air quality. Accordingly, the plant was portrayed as yet another example of US enterprise treating Canada’s front door like their back door, i.e. depositing its least desirable activities on this peripheral border. This is much like McGreevy (1988) suggests for the US chemical industry along the Niagara Frontier or a more recent attempt to establish a nuclear waste depository on the west Texas-Mexican border (Rodriguez & Hagan, 2001). For their part, the project proponents have tended to portray the opposition as an example of trans-border NIMBYism.¹ From a regionalist perspective, the SE2 issue raises micro-scale questions of integration throughout Cascadia. Does the impasse represent the stalling of economic integration especially between the small WA border communities in Whatcom County and their much larger BC counterparts? Or is this the start of a true local, perhaps even grassroots, influence on cross-border regional affairs and the creation of a micro-scale CBR along environmentalist lines? In sum, is this local border operating more as a barrier focused on national themes and control or as a contact point where local choice will inform and influence the national and the Cascadian?

This paper provides a framework for investigating these themes by drawing on new interdisciplinary work into the study of CBRs as they are emerging around the world. It will do this by engaging emerging themes in the CBR literature regarding their nature, origins and operation while relying on the public record of events surrounding SE2. We wish to ask: 1.) how does the Abbotsford-Sumas (A-S) relationship fit into the emerging discussion on CBRs; and 2.) from the micro-scale what does this tell us about the potential for Cascadia?

¹ NIMBY is an acronym for “not in my backyard.”
This paper is organized into three major parts. The next section defines a CBR and explores how a borderland evolves into a CBR. The third section provides the basics of the case study including a geographic and historic background to the A-S region and then an outline of events that have unfolded concerning SE2. The fourth section then puts these two pieces together by using the lens of the CBR paradigm to review and interpret the events in the A-S borderland and answers our research question concerning the value of using this approach to understand these events. This is followed with a short concluding section focusing on suggested future directions of inquiry.

The Cross-border Region

According to Perkmann and Sum the era of the CBR has arrived, where the CBR is defined to be “…a territorial unit that comprises contiguous sub-national units from two or more nation-states…[where] the construction of cross-border regions has become a more or less explicit strategic objective pursued by various social forces within and beyond the border” (2002, p. 3). With the end of the Cold War and the rise of global capitalism, the national scale as the “natural” unit for planning, policy and decision making has changed as the supra national organization and the CBR at opposite ends of the spectrum have begun to supplement and also complement it (Leresche & Saez, 2002). As a result, there has been a “relativization of scale” (Jessop, 2002, p. 25). Economic, political, social, and even environmental relations are no longer controlled solely at the national scale; instead a proliferation of scales has emerged ranging from the global to the local. Especially in the economic realm, the post-WWII era factors that led to the primacy of the national scale for economic governance have been replaced with what Jessop identifies as “the knowledge based economy,” which is causing governance to migrate to the scale both institutional and geographic most appropriate to the issues. Leresche and Saez describe a multiplicity of overlapping scales with variable geometry. Rather than decisions being made based on a “topocratic” logic (a logic based on an authority in a single defined stable territory, i.e. nation-state) a multi-territorial “adhocratic” logic has emerged, where “adhocratic logics are based on reference territories of variable geometry, with vague and multiple boundaries that change according to scale on which problems are treated” (2002, p. 95).

Operating in parallel with these geographic logics are institutional logics. On the one hand is the affiliation logic related to identity with the traditional political territory and in the case of Western nations based on a democratic foundation. On the other hand, there is the more efficiency based network or functional logic which can emerge from and/or helps create the CBR. What then results is “multilevel governance and problem solving.” Under this new rubric the old national scale is not simply replaced or usurped by a new scale but instead coexists with a variety of new scales that overlap, parallel, replace, or are contained in all or parts of the old. In a similar fashion, the new functional logic augments the affiliation logic in issues that can be “multiterritorial, multisectoral, and multi-institutional” (Leresche & Saez, 2002, p. 94). Also, under this new cognitive
regime, it is the problem that helps define the scale[s] at which it will be dealt with, not simply the scale that defines and dictates the solution to the problem as the old national topocratic method had done. However, as Leresche and Saez further emphasize, due to the relative regulatory weakness of enforcing decisions made by CBRs, it is their complexity and opacity which stands out. Thus, successful governance in these regions relies on recognition of interdependencies and cooperation between all parties as they pursue joint strategic objectives. For example, the emergence of “Greater China” (Sum, 2002) based on erstwhile rivals China and Taiwan along with Hong Kong is a good example of how this very complex issue of carving out a thriving CBR while maintaining strong yet somewhat rival national territorial identities can be navigated.

In the post-war era, Leresche and Saez propose that there are three successive eras of ascendancy in what they typify as political frontier or governmentality regimes which relate to the type and locus of control exerted by the overlapping scales affecting CBRs. Although Leresche and Saez suggest that these three regimes (government, crisis of governability, and governance) have appeared chronologically over the last several decades, they actually reflect a multi-scalar continuum which has coexisted with the emergence of nation-states, where scalar ascendancy among them could be more a result of a sense of national security as suggested by House (as cited in Minghi, 1991) than temporal evolution.

The government regime reflects the top-down, centralized national scale which typified control over CBR public activities until the waning of the Cold War. Cross-border issues are treated as international affairs, and the boundary is both a defence against outside intrusion and a definer of national identity. In such a core-periphery structure, the local border regions have little room for autonomous independent movement or even influence on national decisions. Examples of impacts on borderlands which occurred during this regime that recognized specialized local needs and opportunities were the North US Auto Pact, maquiladoras along the US-Mexican border, and a variety of sponsored border activities between the then European Common Market countries. All of these required national scale approval, guidance and control, regardless of how localized they were.

The crisis of governability regime is defined more as an interlude than as a stable end point, a period of crisis, conflict, and change where the national scale attempts to continue to control and dam up the ever-growing demands of the CBR which are beginning the process of overflow across the border. Here, if we think of the three political boundary regimes as part of a continuum or balance beam with more stability when the ends dominate (border as primarily barrier or primarily contact point), this represents a period of transition (overflow) where the national scale still attempts to exert absolute control, but is not equipped to address the burgeoning local needs. Meanwhile, the local region has only begun to exert itself and is neither independent enough nor focused enough to exert much control over its local destiny. The local scale has begun to discover that to plan for its future as a CBR it must be more independent of the national scale than the center is willing to permit and also more open to building long-term trans-national ties with neighboring regions than it is often prepared to do, especially if cultural
and economic differences are substantial. Current events along the Arizona-Mexican and California-Mexican border seem to mimic this crisis-of-governability regime. Although these areas have a growing need to create and manage CBRs with a strong local commitment and common vision it is hampered first by the fact that most real control is still at national and state/provincial scales and second that local-scale actors still seem to be addressing only one problem at a time and have yet to articulate a common sense of purpose, vision, or identity. Castillo (2001) finds that the result in places like the two Nogales (Arizona and Sonora) is that the US federal government has made a once fairly open “white border” into a black forbidding one cutting social ties that extend back generations; the state-to-state level cooperation and coordination also is seen as lacking and being unresponsive to truly local needs. Finally, the local public officials only seem able to react after a crisis has appeared, not pro-act with well structured long-term social objectives. Scott in viewing the same region, notes “…that senior governments and nation-states — unilaterally, bilaterally, or within multilateral cooperation contexts — define the basic parameters of cross-border regionalism” (2002, p. 205). As a result, he sees no CBR identity arising that challenges the existing nation-states, but he does see the beginnings of the creation of pragmatic local institutions to address cross border issues.

Governance emphasizes the emergence of governing cooperation and coordination networks across borders. A term used by Leresche and Saez to explain the underlying operational logic of this regime is synopsis, a borrowed biological term which is defined as “…‘very fine communication between neighboring cells through small networks in a membrane’ or ‘a point of contact between two neurons’” (Dictionary Robert, reported in Leresche & Saez, 2002, p. 88). Basically this stresses the functionality of public and/or private action relationships located on a network extending across the border. In the case of a CBR the informal networks occur at multiple and overlapping scales, geographies, and institutions both public and private formal and informal with the goal of furthering the strategic objectives. Note that what is being stressed here is the mechanism not the place, a mechanism that overcomes the problems of ineffective “…government institutions and the somewhat unsystematic activism of the social actors…” (2002, p. 88). The spatial extent of a CBR is thus not pre-ordained nor does it have a hard border. Instead through the evolution, growth, and decline as well as broadening and thickening of synaptic networks cross-border informal relationships slowly become formalized and linked to public and private institutions creating a maze of geometries with the CBR emerging from its core. However, much like we draw atoms with fixed orbital paths for electrons even though this has no basis in reality, we will see researchers use fixed boundaries to define CBRs.

Two other interesting speculations regarding the governance regime and CBRs, noted by Leresche and Saez, are that it appears to be less passionate, depoliticizing, and deideologizing. The key ideas emphasized here are that a CBR becomes a “working community” not a new mini nation-state. Value in the relationship comes not necessarily from a historical or regional identity but from “proximity, authenticity, and conviviality,” that is from the action of cooperation and coordination not from some formal boundary. Second, “governance because of its neofunctionalist tone tends to highlight the
imperatives of rationality, over and above partisan divisions paralyzing collective action” (2002, p. 89). Its focus is on cooperation and coordination based on local interests and thus can ignore more partisan issues over which this scale has no control. Finally, “…ideological motives (national ideologies, ideologies spawned by the center-periphery opposition) were considered obsolete from the point of view of rational and functional action” (2002, p. 89). Likewise, ideologies that subscribe specific and even adversarial roles to public and private interests are projected to no longer hold sway.

In summary, this section provides us with a broad definition of what a CBR is and how the political frontier regime evolves as a CBR emerges from a borderland. This provides us with a template to explore the recent events in the A-S borderland and look for evidence of the emergence of a CBR. The next section describes the A-S borderland and then the events concerning the SE2 controversy. The following section then uses the CBR lens to evaluate these events.

**SE2 and the Abbotsford-Sumas Cross-border Region**

**Historical and Geographical Setting**

This analysis is set in the Fraser Lowland region and focuses on events that occurred in the border communities of Abbotsford and Sumas. The Fraser Lowland is bordered on the north by the Coast Mountains, on the east and south by the Cascade Mountains and Chuckanut Plateau, and on the west by the Strait of Georgia. The Fraser River and to a lesser degree the Nooksack River have been instrumental in filling the geologic trough underlying this lowland, leaving an area of moderate elevation walled in by mountains, plateau, and ocean.

The Lowland forms an approximate equilateral triangle: one side parallels the coast, with Vancouver, BC at the upper northern corner and Bellingham, WA at the lower southern corner. As the triangle tapers inland, A-S is close to the third corner of the triangle. The international border runs from the coast inland past the A-S divide and further up the Fraser Valley, splitting the Lowland into nearly equal US (western Whatcom County) and Canadian (lower BC mainland) parts. As an ecological region the Lowland is unified and only since the 1846 Oregon Treaty has it been under separate political management. But, even this separation was slow in arriving. Well into the twentieth century travel across this border maintained its frontier heritage with Canadian students in the Columbia Valley freely traveling daily across farm fields to nearby US schools. However, over time crossing has become ever more controlled. In recent years, first in the name of stemming drugs and illegal aliens, and now in the words of one border guard to prevent terrorists from “taking out Cincinnati,” it has become a formidable barrier.

At a more macro scale, the Fraser Lowland lies at the geographic epicenter of the larger cross-border region known as Cascadia. Sparke (2002) describes Cascadia to be a “concept” CBR with indistinct limits; more of a “state of mind” or commodity than fixed
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ty. Nevertheless, Cascadia is touted as the most prominent CBR of any
description along the western portion of the United States-Canada border. Depending on
the eye, or intent, of the beholder, Cascadia might encompass the entire west coast of the
US and Canada, from California to Alaska and inland to the states of Idaho and Montana
and the province of Alberta. At the other end of the spectrum, the linear strip that
connects Vancouver, BC to Seattle, WA and Portland OR has been dubbed the Cascadia
Corridor.

In his review of the Cascadia concept, Alper notes that all applications share the same
goal: “to diminish the barrier effect carved by the border in order to stimulate common
action on behalf of regional goals” (1996, p. 2). However, there are two fundamentally
different visions for Cascadia: economic versus ecological.

Sumas, WA started as a border settlement with an equally small Canadian twin,
Huntingdon, BC. As the twin towns initially were plotted out, each blended into the other
and helped create the economies of scale to supply one another’s needs, and each
benefited from the “border paradox” (Knotter, 2003) by providing goods or services to
cross-border clientele. However, the gradual tightening of the border, but even more so
the coming of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1891 several kilometres
north of the border, established the then village of Abbotsford as the local hub for
Canadian activity, leading to the decline of Huntingdon and anaemic growth of Sumas.
Eventually, Huntingdon was annexed into the expanding city of Abbotsford and now
mainly exists as only the name of the Canadian side of the border crossing.

The post-war boom of the lower mainland of BC (as the Canadian portion of the Fraser
Lowland is commonly known) and annexation brought thousands of new inhabitants into
the area that became the modern City of Abbotsford and swelled the population from
approximately 40,000 in 1950 to 124,000 in 2006, with a wider metropolitan population
of 160,000. Sumas, however, served as little more than a combination peripheral small
town at the farthest reaches of the US economy and, depending on the exchange rate, a
cross-border retail center for gasoline, cheese, butter, and milk for the Canadians. When
times were good, like the early 1990s, residents complained about the ability to cross
their main street due to traffic backups of Canadians trying to get their US bought goods
back across the border. But the decline of the Canadian dollar in the late 1990s has left
Sumas with empty storefronts and closed gas stations.

In an attempt to overcome this boom-bust cycle, Sumas tried turning to industry and
electrical energy production. However, given its location on the US periphery, 20
kilometres from the nearest major state highway (the Guide Meridian) and even further to
Interstate 5, its most likely scenario for success would be through some type of link with
Canada, whose rail yards back up practically into Sumas and whose Trans Canada
highway is only a short three kilometres north. Inventoring its advantages, Sumas noted
that a Canadian natural gas pipeline from Alberta passes as near to town as the highway.
Second, a shared cross-border aquifer (Sumas-Abbotsford Aquifer) provides ample water
for industrial use, even if some of it suffers from nitrogen contamination. Third, the
Canadian power grid, which thanks to NAFTA now serves as a conduit not only for the US and Canadian markets but also Mexico, is just eight kilometres north of the border. Finally, ever rising demand for power in the US, especially in California, seems to assure a market for whatever can be produced. After the successful implementation of a 120 megawatt co-generation plant, Sumas Energy 1 (SE1), in 1992 that provided not only power for the US market but also a kiln operation to cure imported Canadian wood, a second much larger plant SE2 was proposed in 1999.

As Sumas has searched to find some long-term economic traction, Abbotsford began to feel the fallout of its own success. Located on the inland reaches of the Fraser Valley 50 kilometres east of Vancouver, the air shed around Abbotsford has begun to feel the stress of ever-growing numbers, especially in a region known for heavy automobile use, at least by Canadian standards. This has been further exacerbated by intensive agriculture and dairy farming which generates large amounts of ammonia and accompanying white smog.

As a result, several government studies have raised alarm bells stating that the Fraser Valley is one of the four most polluted regions in Canada (Labelle, 1998) and has among the highest asthma rates in BC (Fraser Health Authority, 2002). However, given Abbotsford's appetite for continued explosive growth into the future, it needs to defend its right to exploit whatever part of the air shed that can be further used. This has resulted in the situation of an elephant and a mouse fighting over a very fragile and stressed air shed, where each feels the need and the right to add considerably more pollution in the name of progress.

A timeline of events involving SE2 is provided in Appendix 1 and also indicates the spatial/institutional scale at which the action occurred (four different scales are indicated: national or macro; regional or meso — implying a state and/or provincial; local or micro — focusing on A-S borderland; and grassroots — citizen based within the A-S borderland). These actions are broadly divided into three moments: 1) prologue — prior to the application of the first revised proposal to WA State’s Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC) in December 1999; 2) EFSEC period Dec. 1999–March 2005; and 3) Epilogue — fallout from SE2. Although this appears as three clearly demarcated periods, in fact as will become apparent there is some overlap. The following discussion of the SE2 “saga” identifies key dates, agents and events, and their geographic scale.

**Prologue**

Prior to the SE2 controversy, NESCO in 1992 completed SE1 — a small 120mw co-generation natural gas fired power plant. Permitting for this plant due to its small size occurred at the local Sumas, WA city level, and has proven to be highly successful and profitable to NESCO, Sumas, and the Canadian firm using the surplus heat to kiln dry wood. SE1 too had faced some local opposition, but not enough to prevent its completion. However, an unrelated attempt by Puget Power, a regional utility supplier, to expand its power grid elsewhere in Whatcom County at this time led to the passing of a grassroots initiative in 1990 limiting the location of high-voltage power corridors.
In 1998 NESCO explored building SE2 with civic leaders in both Sumas and Abbotsford. At the outset relations between all three parties remained warm and cordial. Indeed, in November 1997, the City of Sumas signed a unique 20-year cross-border arrangement with the City of Abbotsford. The latter agreed to process sewage from Sumas that included effluent from SE1, which had come on line in 1993,\(^2\) and allowed for expansion over time. The sewage began to flow north in 1998 and continues to the present. NESCO sought to further expand the sewage deal, in preparation for the infrastructural requirements of SE2. In August 1998, the City of Abbotsford agreed in principle with a recommendation from its Director of Engineering to export water “from high nitrate wells in the Abbotsford water supply system,” and forwarded it to the Regional authority (Abbotsford, 1998). Further, it was reported in the local press that “Abbotsford favored exporting 4 million gallons of non-potable water to Sumas daily, which would have brought the City of Abbotsford in excess of $1 million annually. Sumas Energy 2 was also prepared to spend $4.5 million for the city’s sewer lines to Huntingdon” (Noteboom, 2000). Abbotsford public works staff began preliminary planning for all of the above and issued a letter to EFSEC showing support for SE2.

In January of 1999, SE2 filed a proposal with EFSEC to construct a 660 megawatt natural-gas powered electric generation plant with diesel back up for times when gas would be in short supply, such as winter cold snaps, and asked for expedited processing. SE2 proposed to use Canadian natural gas, water, and wastewater treatment and access the regional power grid by constructing an international power line north across the border. The Canadian portion of the 230 kilovolt transmission line extended 8.5 kilometres from the border to BC Hydro’s Clayburn substation in Abbotsford, BC. As a “merchant plant,” i.e., one that exists primarily to sell power to the highest bidder rather than to meet local needs, access to a large potential market was essential to SE2’s business plan. From its connection point in Abbotsford, SE2 had access to a power grid that provides power to BC, Alberta and 11 US states (NEB, 2004). Simultaneously SE2 filed with the US EPA for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and the Canadian National Energy Board for permits to build the Canadian portion of the power line.

The “prologue” period, 1997–1999, was therefore marked by relatively cordial relations amongst the primary players in the SE2 saga: the Cities of Sumas and Abbotsford and NESCO. This period included Abbotsford’s agreement in principle to expand its sewer and water arrangement with Sumas. Things did not go as quickly and smoothly as hoped for, and in January 2000 SE2 needed to re-file with EFSEC and adjust the original design, dropping the importation of Canadian water and other adjustments. This also ended the attempt at a fast-track resolution.

\(^2\) Prior to this agreement the effluent from SE1 was concentrated and shipped by truck to a distant wastewater treatment facility in the US at considerable expense.
EFSEC Period

Growth of opposition. On January 4, 2000 the general public was brought into the picture at a scoping meeting for the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), a necessary step before EFSEC could begin its hearings on SE2. As a result of information that appeared at this meeting and had evidently been trickling out in prior months, public opinion quickly galvanized against the plant as did the Abbotsford city council. This strained the relationship with the City of Sumas, which supported the plant for its much needed economic benefits.

The unprecedented “fight” that ensued over SE2’s proposal was fuelled by two concerns. First, the fact sheet released at the January meeting suggested that some of SE2’s power could be exported via cables on the US side of the border (Hanners, 2000). This and other unanswered questions concerning environmental impacts quickly sparked mobilization of dormant environmentalists in Whatcom County from the 1990 power line initiative. Second, sparked by this opposition and the proposed size and design of SE2, especially its diesel backup generators, questions of the impact of the emissions quickly overflowed the border in the already stressed air shed with the US environmentalists aiding and abetting their Canadian counterparts. In spite of the fact that the plant was relatively clean in that it met all relevant emission thresholds, nevertheless it would have still added three tons of “criteria and toxic pollutants to the [confined] air shed [of the Fraser Lowland]” (EFSEC, 2001). The vociferous public debate on the proposal and the focus of the regulatory agency reviews (WA’s EFSEC and Canada’s NEB) all evaluated the balance between the environmental costs and energy benefits of SE2’s power.

Several of the most visible opponents were GASP (Generations Affected by Senseless Power) on the Sumas side of the border, and the SE2 Action Group allied with ADBA (Abbotsford Downtown Business Association) on the Canadian side. Two measures are available to judge the level of this local opposition. The first is a newspaper article and letters to the editor study by a research team of Canadian and US students (Forward, Johnson, Hendy, & Chervenock, 2004). They demonstrated that most interest and concern about the plant was highly local. Even the nearby cities of Bellingham and Vancouver showed considerably less coverage of and concern about the controversy than the Abbotsford Times and Lynden Tribune. Second, opposition was proportionately and numerically much greater on the Canadian side than the US side of the border. However, opponents outnumbered proponents on both sides. Greater Canadian concern and

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3 This team of undergraduate students was part of a unique Borderlands course that concentrates on the Fraser Lowland including both US and Canadian students that the authors have been involved with through their institutions over the last 5 years. See Nicol, Belec, and Buckley (2003) for details.

4 Since Sumas has no newspaper of its own, the closest is the Lynden Tribune — a weekly paper published 20 kilometres away in the town of Lynden.
opposition might well be expected given the fact they shared the environmental impacts but received very limited economic benefits.

A second measure of support/opposition is recorded in local city elections which served as plebiscites on political leadership. In the case of Sumas, the local administration won re-election garnering more than 60% of the votes, but only after a rather divisive campaign. However, in Abbotsford, despite the city council passing a unanimous resolution against “all aspects” of SE2 in April of 2000 stating voracious opposition and filing an application to become an intervener in the EFSEC process, there was fallout. Not only did the mayor fail to remain in office, but his replacement, Mary Reeves, was a vocal opponent of SE2 and a member of ADBA. These results taken together show wide and deep opposition to SE2 in Abbotsford but support inside the city limits of Sumas with opposition in the surrounding US region covered by the Lynden Tribune.

A clear outcome of these events was the cooling of relations between the cities of Sumas and Abbotsford. The former informal weekly meetings between the two mayors ended. Other venues such as the 1997 sewer agreement and the taskforce on the joint aquifer and flooding were used by the Canadian side as an additional means of hampering SE2. The joint sewer agreement was seen as a last straw since it could be terminated after 2007 with five years notice. By November of 2002 Abbotsford suggested to Sumas that it was considering such a termination order, but first it would consider having an arbitrator interpret the document to see if it had to accept effluent from SE2. The arbitration request was put on hold in spring 2003 while awaiting the results from NEB. In short cordial relationships were replaced by a mini cold war, even as grassroots level relationships between opponents on both sides of the border blossomed.

**Permitting Decisions — EFSEC and NEB.** With the battle lines drawn the EFSEC and NEB hearings became the battlegrounds. A brief discussion of the primary events concerning this phase of SE2 as outlined in the Appendix is provided next.

Given the size of the new power plant, WA state-level approval was required, unlike SE1. This involved a two-step procedure. First, WA State’s EFSEC would hold hearings and then recommend to the governor to either approve or turn down all state-level permits. Second, the governor would make the final decision. Thus, NESCO applied to EFSEC for such permits in 1999. As part of this process NESCO was required to file an EIA with Region 10 of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). As noted previously, the January 2000 SE2 proposal included back-up diesel generators. This proposal was rejected unanimously (0-11) in February of 2001 and withdrawn by NESCO, short circuiting a decision by the Governor. In June, a revised design was then submitted,

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5 The former mayor George Ferguson would later return to office in the 2005 election due to a variety of issues not the least of which was his vocal opposition to SE2 during the interim, demonstrating the complexity of local issues and emotions.
which removed the diesel back-up provision and offered a program for creating offsets for NOx and PM10 in Canada. In a surprising reversal, this revised proposal was approved resoundingly by a reconstituted EFSEC board, with all twelve members voting to accept, and later by Governor Gary Locke in August of 2002.

A key event during these hearings was the granting of intervener status to the City of Abbotsford and Fraser Valley Regional District from the start and later the BC Provincial government, when it finally decided to join the fray after the 2001 re-submittal. This was an admission by WA State that international players from across the border should have a seat at the table along with state-based entities, an important first. However, despite the fact that Gov. Locke telephoned BC political leaders for their views after EFSEC approved SE2, it appears that project approval was based primarily on internal Sumas and WA State opinions in the long run as discussed in the next subsection.

After Gov. Locke’s approval of the project, Canadians started casting about for any higher level federal body to stop SE2. First was an appeal made by BC along with Environment Canada to the US EPA appeals board on somewhat obscure technical grounds to deny the EIA. This was rather quickly and soundly rejected. Second, BC in a final effort turned to the NEB. The role of NEB was to issue the permit for connection of SE2 onto the grid in Abbotsford. Without such a connection it is questionable if the plant would ever be viable, especially given opposition to new high voltage power lines in Whatcom County. Traditionally NEB limited its review to the direct impacts of power lines themselves. However, in the case of SE2 at the urging of BC, Abbotsford and others, NEB agreed in late 2002 to look at both the impact of the power line and the power plant to supply it, even though the power plant was across the border in the US. This proved to be a crucial step. Suddenly the Canadians put themselves in the position to dictate environmental if not economic policy to their neighbour. After announcing in December 2003 that the power line itself had an acceptable impact, in March 2004 NEB rejected NESCO’s application on the grounds that the power plant would have adverse environmental impacts on the local region in Canada (NEB, 2004).

Parallel to this move in Canada, legislation was moving through the Whatcom County Council to control the size and location of high voltage power lines. These regulations, approved in late July 2004, are seen as crucial to preventing a supplier from manipulating existing permits to ship large quantities of power in multiple, parallel lower voltage lines. Although these regulations were a result of long standing opposition to new high voltage lines in Whatcom County including a successful 1990 referendum issue, they essentially forced SE2 to link to the Canadian grid in Abbotsford or not at all.

In a last-ditch effort NESCO appealed to the Canadian Federal Court of Appeal, challenging the NEB’s decision to deny building a connection to the grid based on the pollution generated on the US side of the border. The company based its appeal on “errors of law,” and argued that the NEB ruling exceeded its jurisdiction. It was further argued, with an implicit reference to the “spirit” of NAFTA, that the NEB decision was “parochial because it put local opposition ahead of national interest…” (Hortegas, 2004).
In the fall of 2005, the courts sided with the NEB, and in early spring 2006 NESCO choose not to appeal to the Canadian Supreme Court and instead formerly withdrew its proposal.

Epilogue
As a final footnote on this saga, during the fall 2005 Abbotsford election, politicians were pressed on the issue of ending the waste water treatment agreement with Sumas to prevent future SE2 style developments; a move many grassroots opponents favored. However two events tempered the general mood in Abbotsford. First, NESCO’s January 2005 decision not to further appeal the NEB decision to the Canadian Supreme Court effectively ended all hope of exporting power through Canada, the only financially viable means of linking to the grid. Second, George Ferguson, who many felt had been unfairly tarred with SE2 during the 2002 election, ousted Mary Reeves to reassume his old position as mayor of Abbotsford. As a result in January of 2006 Ferguson extended the olive branch to Sumas stating he thought it was necessary to renegotiate the sewer agreement but adding that he was quite willing to continue accepting residential and existing industrial effluent; however, it was further industrial expansion that was of concern (Beyak, 2006).

Later in March of 2006, Sumas Mayor Ray Bromely, although disappointed that Sumas would be losing $2 million in tax revenues, noted that the project could have cost them their connection to the sewer treatment plant in Abbotsford. He stated, “That could put us back into the previous situation, where we [were] releasing effluent into Sumas River, and nobody wants that” (Toth, 2006). However, he also noted that “I still think it’s [SE2] a good project. If there’s any conciliation, if there’s a power shortage in the future, they can’t blame us” (Toth, 2006).

In November of 2008 a revised contract was signed between Abbotsford and Sumas giving Abbotsford the right to reject effluent from new activities deemed harmful to their environment. This suggests a further attempt to reinforce the border as a shield against what Abbotsford has seen as uncontrolled and damaging industrial expansion on the other side, especially so since it is doubtful that Sumas would have the resources to create its own independent industrial wastewater facilities.

Having laid out the events surrounding SE2 we now turn to its relationship with a CBR.

Discussion: A-S Region emerging CBR?

This section begins with a summary of the main points regarding the SE2 controversy. This provides a framework for then comparing the actions from our case study to the theoretical paradigm for the emergence of a CBR in a borderland area. It also enables us to comment on the larger issue raised in our introduction as to the current status of the proposed larger scale Cascadian CBR.
The following key points summarize the SE2 issue as it affected the A-S borderland:

- At the local level, the relationship between Abbotsford and Sumas was and remains very much ad hoc and episodic and the border appears to be as much if not more of a barrier and shield as a result of this dispute than it was at the outset. Although the two places share a sewage treatment plant (really Sumas utilizes the Abbotsford plant), past official goodwill has been threatened.

- Abbotsford spent a great deal of effort to stymie SE2 by appealing to Canadian and US regional and national level actors, but never appears to have considered Sumas’s needs.

- Likewise, Sumas has done its best to ignore Abbotsford’s concerns.

- Although, Abbotsford was clearly opposed to SE2, it is not clear what they were in favour of regarding the shared air shed.

- Sumas clearly favoured the plant, but more as a means of bolstering tax base than as an environmental statement.

- However, much of the surrounding Whatcom County appeared to oppose SE2 but as was the case with Abbotsford it was not clear what they were in favour of.

- After the breakdown of the initial 1998 ‘deal’ between local A-S political leaders and NESCO, any decision making appears to have occurred at the regional and national scales clearly located on one or the other side of the border. The 1998 deal had been the only attempt to create a local cross-border agreement.

- WA State accepted Abbotsford, the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD), and BC as interveners in the EFSEC hearings — an important step forward, although at the end it is not apparent how much weight was ultimately given to their desires.

- NEB, at the urging of the BC Provincial Government with the support of opponents to SE2, established a cross-border public interest area, but only from the aspect of shielding its own citizens from US based risk versus Canadian benefits.

- The Canadian courts effectively re-affirmed the use of the border as a shield in upholding the NEB decision.

From the above we conclude that using SE2 as a case study, it is not clear that anything approaching a viable CBR is yet emerging in the A-S local region. In fact at this micro level, SE2 might actually be a set back. At the state/provincial level the signals are still limited and unclear. WA State is attempting to be more accommodating to BC, but is this
more form than substance? Finally, at the national scale NEB seems to have reaffirmed the border as a barrier rather than contact.

Researching the role of the border as a potential barrier or contact shows that SE2 clearly involves opportunities for both. However at the micro level it appears to still act as a ‘passage between two realities’ rather than a midwife for the emergence of a CBR. It is the center/periphery relationships that have proven to be crucial in decision making regarding SE2; nothing approaching a common local plan is apparent, certainly not in regards to managing the joint local air shed. Although past state/provincial sponsorship of joint action for sewage treatment and also flood control have encouraged Abbotsford and Sumas to act as a CBR, this past goodwill has been severely strained if not lost. Finally, globalization has yet to exert much impact on this micro-scale relationship. There has been some movement of Canadian industry across the border adjacent to Abbotsford’s rail yards in search of economic benefits such as the SE1 cogeneration plant and lower cost US labour, however nothing approaching a symbiotic relationship between the two places exists. In fact NAFTA disputes in softwoods might actually be harming rather than helping the creation of a CBR economy throughout Cascadia.

Despite all of these problems, are there any signs of growing coordination and cooperation deemed so critical by Leresche and Saez? In regards to identity the situation is mixed. Abbotsford is clearly an ethnically diverse city with Canada’s largest concentration of South Asian population. Sumas remains small town, “white” America. Politically, ethnically and culturally the places seem as distinctly different now as at any time in their histories. On the environmental level, given the broad opposition to SE2 on both sides of the border, perhaps a common identity is emerging, at least at the meso level. However, until concrete cross-border plans for common resource management emerge, this may be wishful thinking. In fact such distrust continues on the Canadian side, that some are calling for an international clean air treaty rather than greater cooperation directly with Sumas.

As scale changes to the grassroots, one finds real signs of cooperation and coordination between groups like GASP and the SE2 Action Group, quite a contrast to how the two cities themselves communicated in the SE2 era. It is interesting to note that at the state/provincial level a bit of positive evidence does exist between WA and BC, especially the inclusion of BC as an intervener at the EFSEC hearings. However, as noted above does this truly represent substance or merely form or temporary conditions? Could a change in political regimes quickly sweep aside this informal collaboration?

Finally the question can be asked — are new forms of public action and recomposition of territory underway? Certainly at the meso level WA and BC are continuing to create a new relationship; however will the appeals of BC to the US EPA and Canadian NEB make them look like an unfaithful partner when things don’t go their way? Also, will BC reciprocate? At the grassroots level common cause has been made to keep the air shed cleaner. However, is this a complete change in the way of doing business or are people just preserving their own rights and reserving the air shed for ever more automobiles or
other activities, thus little more than a variation of NIMBYism? Might it be time to consider the air shed itself as a geographic regional commodity and privatize it and auction off its capacity to the highest bidder? Imagine a “blue eyed Arab” scenario where Sumas suddenly found itself in possession of air rights that Abbotsford is willing to buy or lease at top dollar. In the short run this certainly could provide an economic solution and a different way of understanding the region. Over the long run, in fact it might then be Sumas calling for less pollution and Abbotsford taking a more laissez-faire approach. Thus, a key issue that remains is the international commons. As long as one side perceives that there is more to exploit at little personal cost and much benefit it is difficult to expect an environmentally based CBR. This does suggest that either a cross-border grassroots level movement needs to effect things from below or a new cross-border meso- or macro-level organization needs to effect change from above, or some combination of the two. In Leresche and Saez’s frontier regimes, it appears that we are in the regime of crisis of governability.

Even though we have not yet entered the regime of governance the issues of passion, politics and ideology should also be considered. Clearly passions have been inflamed: US (read Sumas and NESCO) as the aggressor, US as the careless littering neighbour, US as the unbridled representative of global capitalism. All these themes percolate through the dispute. In these instances the Canadian response appears to have been to hide behind the shield of the border, not unlike the use of the border to shield fledging Canadian culture even in NAFTA (Widdis, 1992), and appeal to higher scales of government to protect the air shed. Yet despite these passions and even threats to close Sumas’s access to Abbotsford’s sewage treatment plant, how true do they ring? Is this really a nation versus nation issue or culture versus culture? Or is this a dispute over dividing up the commons or even determining its carrying capacity? Given the fact that SE2 did not appear to be well supported on either side of the border outside of perhaps the city limits of Sumas, there still seems to be some confusion here. Is this truly passions being inflamed by differences on two sides of the border or passions inflamed by local economic interests, both Canadian and US, desiring to exploit the air-shed to the maximum from their respective side. Clearly the grassroots organizations show how the “us” of the greens is the same on both sides; then who actually is the “them”? Perhaps in the immortal words of Walt Kelly, “We have met the enemy and it is us.” This question of passions needs further investigation. It is not the ethnic, cultural rivalries scholars are more familiar with, nor is it neatly packaged into economic ideologies.

This then brings us to the issue of depoliticalizing and deideologizing. Clearly there is no single cross-border political or ideological movement orchestrating the current situation. There is no cross-border Green party or business party. Further, the complexity of the coalition opposing SE2 suggests that there is no single ideology, be it ecologically or growth based, that holds sway. People on both sides of the border have yet to come to grips with what they truly want, let alone what is possible or desirable. As a result, it appears that both sides are still more comfortable with letting more distant actors make the real decisions rather than locally wrestling with some very troubling issues. All of this confirms that at best we are in the very early stages of the possible formation of a CBR,
whether the scale is limited to the Fraser Valley or encompasses a larger Cascadian landscape.

**Conclusions**

As a summary of the above and reference back to questions raised in our introduction, there is evidence that SE2 continues to represent US disregard for Canada’s front door, where the US periphery is still seen as almost the end of the earth. But there are also some hopeful signs that, at least between WA and BC, this situation might be slowly changing. As for NIMBYism, generally it appears that only small depressed towns are clamouring for any kind of ‘dirty’ activity, be it a power plant or prison. But, economically a natural-gas-fired power plant can occur anywhere along a gas line where sufficient water can be found. Placing SE2 in Sumas may have had as much to do with NIMBYism in California (which is the most likely market for the power) than locally or even hardnosed economic sense. As for local economic integration, ever since the border became more organized nearly a century and a half ago, natural economic border regions across the US and Canadian west have been carefully segregated by national policies. In the A-S region, whatever economic integration has occurred in recent years seems more a result of reaction to national policies rather than any true local coordination. The unstable exchange rate has made it difficult to make any long-term plans on retail investment, and whatever wood industry that has crossed the line south seems to be more a reaction to the ongoing NAFTA softwood disputes than perhaps careful regional economic planning. Hence, SE2 is possibly more a result of the failure of a true CBR economy to emerge than any type of integration.

Despite the limited local A-S economic integration, and Sparke’s (2002) conclusion that Cascadian economic integration is still an illusion, perhaps environmental integration will be spurred by the continued growth throughout the Fraser Lowland. Steps have been taken at the meso and micro level with NGOs and governments of WA and BC (Hilderbrande, Pebbles, & Fraser, 2002) to create a shared vision of the environmental future. Perhaps this vision of Cascadia as an **ecotopia** will have more resonance than Cascadia as an economic region.

So where do we go from here? The CBR framework has served us well in reviewing the public record of events in regards to SE2, but much remains. A prime task is to investigate the emerging government and NGO networks that could foster the synapsis that Leresche and Saez are so expecting to emerge. At the meso scale a better understanding of the existing links created by the BC/WA State Environmental Cooperative Council and how this might have related to Abbotsford, FVRD and BC’s inclusion as an intervener to the EFSEC is very important. At the micro scale what is the relationship between Abbotsford and Sumas today, especially after two changes in administration in Abbotsford? Is there any hope of a collaborative urban growth plan for this metropolitan area, much as has occurred between the two Laredos on the US-
Mexican border (Rodriguez & Hagan, 2001), or is the border too much of a barrier? The authors are currently engaged in a Delphi analysis of local public officials to explore these issues.

Finally, the macro scale needs to be investigated. Is an international air shed treaty a real possibility or merely a dream or perhaps even local bargaining chip? Can the Canadian NEB continue to take into account environmental issues from across the border, even if it appears to dictate trans-border economic policy? Or, have post 9/11 security concerns set back the process of CBRs despite NAFTA and globalization?

In closing, it is apparent that SE2 seems to represent a crisis of governability on the border. It appears to illustrate a situation where people at the local scale felt the need to appeal to more remote, higher scales inside and outside their nation rather than talk directly to their neighbours. What does the future now hold? Have networks been harmed, altered or strengthened? More investigation will help us better understand how the political regime is evolving at the border and if we are closer to the emergence of a CBR at the micro or macro scale.

References

Abbotsford, City of. (1998, August 17). Executive Committee Meeting Minutes.
Hildebrande, L. P., Pebbles, V., & Fraser, D. A. (2002). Cooperative ecosystem management across the Canada-US border: Approaches and experiences of...


### Appendix: Timeline of Events for SE2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>NESCO receives permits from City of Sumas and constructs SE1 a 120mw co-generation power plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>NESCO files initial SE2 plans to EFSEC requesting permits for a dual fuelled natural gas and diesel fuelled 660mw power plant.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grassroots</td>
<td>SE2 Action Group &amp; ADBA [Abbotsford Downtown Business Association] also begins grassroots effort opposing SE2 in Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>EFSEC unanimously rejects initial plan in 11-0 vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>NESCO submits a revised SE2 plan for a natural gas only power plant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>BC granted intervener status on SE2 hearings before EFSEC</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>EPSEC approves SE2 permits by unanimous vote of 12-0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Gov. Locke after hearings and phone discussions with BC gives final approval to SE2 permits</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>BC and Environment Canada challenge EPA permits for SE2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>BC request NEB “…go beyond its normal jurisdiction and consider environmental effects when reviewing the SE2 application.” (M2 Presswire, 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>New mayor of Abbotsford elected, leader in opposition to SE2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NEB declares that the review for connection of SE2 to the power grid can also include the environmental effects of the plant itself</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>EPA rejects BC and Environment Canada's challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NEB rules that connection for SE2 to the power grid is not environmentally damaging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 March</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NEB rejects request for SE2 permit to connect to Canadian power grid citing local environmental impacts of plant itself</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NESCO appeals NEB decision to Federal Court of Appeal in Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Whatcom County re-writes transmission line regulations to prevent SE2 from using existing power line right-of-ways to connect to the grid via Whatcom County</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2005 November</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Federal Court of Appeal unanimously upholds NEB decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 January</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NESCO decides not to appeal the Court decision to the Supreme Court of Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>NESCO explores its transmission options in Whatcom County</td>
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<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Abbotsford suggests reopening the agreement on accepting industrial waste water from Sumas</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>NESCO requests the termination of SE2 site certificate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>EFSEC terminates SE2 site certificate</td>
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Patrick Buckley is an Associate Professor of Geography in the Department of Environmental Studies, Huxley Environmental College, Western Washington University, where he has taught since 1987. He and Dr John Belec have collaborated on cross-border studies for over a decade. In addition they along with the late Doug Nicol establishing a unique cross-border undergraduate course in borderlands which brings together Canadian and American students from each of their institutions on a weekly basis to investigate issues in their shared Fraser Lowland.

John Belec has taught in the Geography Department at University of the Fraser Valley since 1992. For the past decade he has worked with Dr Patrick Buckley at Western Washington University in study of the international border that separates their two institutions, located just 50 kilometres apart. Over the past decade they have collaborated on numerous academic papers, articles and an innovative bi-national university course that annually brings together students from both universities into a team-taught single class. The purpose of the course, unique in North America, is to examine the impact of the border on the international bio-region known as the Fraser Lowland.