



Release Date: December 20, 2013

Northern Gateway Pipeline--Approval Mostly Silent on Upstream Impacts for Alberta's Boreal Forest and Foothills

The National Energy Board (NEB) yesterday recommended approval of the Northern Gateway pipeline across central Alberta to the BC coast. Many of Alberta Wilderness Association's (AWA) concerns regarding routing in Alberta were worked out with Enbridge prior to the application being made.

AWA welcomes the panel's condition for a Linear Feature Management and Removal Plan (LFMRP) for one of Canada's most threatened caribou populations in the Little Smoky area, but AWA is also calling for more attention by Alberta and the federal government to the upstream impacts of energy development. With the exception of the LFMRP for the Little Smoky, the NEB approval is mostly silent on the upstream issues that are already causing significant harm to the lands and waters of Alberta's boreal forest and foothills.

"Vast areas are being fragmented and polluted by the poorly managed impacts due to Alberta's dependence on fossil fuel extraction both from tar sands and liquids-rich natural gas. Caribou herds in Alberta continue their downwards death spiral," says Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist at AWA.

The Northern Gateway and other pipelines will carry bitumen from tar sands deposits as well as a diluting material derived from liquids-rich natural gas. "In Alberta, bitumen and liquids-rich gas are both extracted with disregard for some of the most troubling impacts. There are few management limits to the ongoing loss of wetlands, old growth forest, and to threatened woodland caribou habitat, which is supposed to be protected under federal law," says Campbell.

"There is also unacceptably high risk to surface and ground water, both from the amounts of water used and the threat of freshwater contamination from pipeline spills, or pressurized bitumen blowouts," says Campbell. In 2013, there were five major oil and gas pipeline ruptures in Alberta; in addition, CNRL's Primrose oil sands project has spilled almost 2 million litres of pressurized bitumen to surface at four sites since spring 2013, after contaminating groundwater in a similar incident in 2009.

The Northern Gateway and other pipelines are symptoms of Alberta's almost single-minded focus on fossil fuel production at the expense of a healthy and sustainable environment and species at risk like woodland caribou.

The panel recommended that the Linear Feature Management and Removal Plan "aim for a net decrease in linear feature density where the pipeline corridor overlaps the Little Smoky caribou herd range". This should assist with AWA's efforts to protect the Little Smoky caribou population. AWA continues to advocate for greater protection of wild lands and waters in Alberta's boreal forest and foothills and will work with Enbridge as well as the provincial and federal governments to reduce linear footprint, not just in the Little Smoky, but in all caribou ranges in Alberta.

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