

Northern News Services – July 12, 2002

Protecting a lifeline

Norwegian says seismic company violating Dene law

Derek Neary

Fort Simpson (July 12/02) - Seismic activity isn't welcome on the Mackenzie River, and future drilling is out of the question, according to Herb Norwegian.

Norwegian, assistant negotiator for the Deh Cho First Nations, said the DCFN, through self-government negotiations, is striving to create a buffer to prevent development along the Deh Cho portion of the Mackenzie River.

"If anybody is out there siphoning this kind of (seismic) information, it's a violation of Dene law," he argued. "They should be taken to the Dene Hague or something. They don't have the damn right to do that."

Steve Whidden, an account manager for WesternGeco, said representatives from his company have met several times with Deh Cho leaders to explain their intentions. He described the meetings as "positive."

WesternGeco has already signed a broad memorandum of understanding with the Acho Dene Koe in Fort Liard.

The company hopes to sign similar agreements with other communities in the region, Whidden said. He added that First Nations would be granted access to the seismic data and the project would create two to six jobs for local people in each community, he added.

"We're not the type of company to come into an area, create some bad feelings and not going to be back the following year. We want to be back year after year after year," said Whidden. "Anytime you can move forward with an MOU, and even further with joint partnerships, it does create a feeling of trust."

Even though the proposed seismic activity wouldn't involve drilling, the data could generate interest among oil and gas companies, which may want to conduct exploratory drilling. The prospect makes Norwegian cringe.

"Our banks of the Deh Cho here are just rich with culture and heritage. We don't want (industry) driving any shafts in the river or tampering with the shorelines," he said. "The Deh Cho, the river itself ... that's the pulse, that's what keeps us all alive. If you go for the heart, we'll go for the jugular."

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Mackenzie seismic on hold

WesternGeco's proposal referred to environmental assessment

Derek Neary

Fort Simpson (July 12/02) - A Calgary-based seismic company's plan to scope the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers for oil and gas potential will have to wait until next year.

WesternGeco Canada Ltd. had hoped to begin an estimated \$20 million seismic project along 1,800 kilometres of river this year.

However, federal regulators expressed concerns about potential effects the acoustic methods may have on fish and other aquatic life.

They have referred the proposal to the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board (MVEIRB) for a possible environmental assessment.

Steve Whidden, an account manager for WesternGeco, said his company was prepared for the delay and is willing to undertake the two-dimensional seismic program next year instead.

Whidden said the seismic method WesternGeco plans to use has been done all over the world, including the Beaufort-Delta last summer.

He explained that it involves releasing bubbles of compressed air that oscillate, creating sound waves that can be recorded.

"It's not like in the old days when dynamite was thrown in the water and creates a big pressure wave that kills fish," he said.

Joe Acorn, an environmental assessment officer with the MVEIRB, said he can find no confirmation of similar programs having been conducted in the NWT. Examples from other jurisdictions are useful, but not entirely applicable, according to Acorn.

"There are different species here. It is a different environment," he said.

"So (regulators) want some site-specific, test program data from up here that they can use to predict what the impacts might be."

Whidden replied that his company, in conjunction with the DFO, is willing conduct a monitoring test program this year to verify that there will be no significant environmental consequences.

Deh Cho Drum – July ??, 2002

Running upstream

Derek Neary

Seismic company WesternGeco had the foresight to anticipate regulatory delays for their two-dimensional seismic program on the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers. Therefore executives are not enraged or threatening to pull the plug on the project, contrary to the reaction of some companies in the past.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the National Energy Board certainly don't deserve criticism for referring WesternGeco's proposal to environmental assessment. So long as the project is reviewed in a timely fashion, it's always better to be safe than sorry. As environmental assessment officer Joe Acorn said, there are different species of aquatic life in the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers than there are in other bodies of water. There's a good chance the proposed seismic method will prove harmless to fish and other mammals, but at this point it's just a chance. Once it is a proven fact, then the project will merit regulatory approval.

The real difficulty will apparently be soliciting political approval, at least in the Deh Cho. Herb Norwegian, assistant negotiator for the Deh Cho First Nations (DCFN), was unequivocal in expressing opposition to development on the rivers. There's too much at risk, he argued.

The DCFN already has an Interim Measures Agreement in place with the federal government, which offers some level of environmental protection. A buffer zone to safeguard the Deh Cho portion of the rivers is also in the works.

If WesternGeco is, as Steve Whidden suggested, a company that plans to come back year after year, it will have to reach an understanding with the Deh Cho First Nations. Otherwise, the company's plans may take on water.