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Environmentalists say industry outpacing conservation as North develops

Bob Weber

(CP) - Isidore Manuel wants to assure elders that the abundant fish, birds and moose along the northern reaches of the Mackenzie River will be there to feed future generations of Dene.

He and his fellow negotiators from Fort Good Hope, N.W.T., said this week that an area twice the size of Banff National Park will be among those left untouched by development likely to follow a proposed natural gas pipeline megaproject. "There's a lot of that coming in now, particularly with the pipeline coming up," Manuel says.

"Mineral companies are really starting to come in now and trying to stake lands and acquire lands for exploration."

Northern environmentalists worry that conservation - seen by many aboriginals as the trade-off for gas wells and compressors on their land - is moving far slower than industry.

"It's quite obvious there will be lots of pressure for further development," says Bill Carpenter of the World Wildlife Fund.

"If there's going to be a fast-tracking of development, there's got to be a fast-tracking of conservation."

Of 14 ecosystems along the proposed pipeline route, only three are represented in current land withdrawals, Carpenter says. Even then, they're only lines on a map until more negotiations establish precise boundaries and the level of protection local people want.

Such talks, as well as studies to determine exactly what is in the proposed conservation area, could take years, Carpenter says.

A recent report for the fund by former N.W.T. premier Stephen Kakfwi - who helped Ottawa draft the 1997 protected areas strategy - said federal indecision is further slowing the process.

"The action plan lacks commitment from the federal government," said the report. "The assumption of the protected areas strategy that senior government officials can or will complete initiatives of the (strategy) is wrong."

Ottawa has promised to pay half the \$18-million cost over five years of setting up the protected areas. That money has yet to appear. Nor have funds been earmarked for other specific conservation projects.

Kakfwi points out that former heritage minister Sheila Copps promised up to \$8 million to develop two historic sites on Great Bear Lake.

"That hasn't happened yet and she's no longer minister," said Kakfwi. "We're not sure where the federal government stands on these things any more."

Pipeline proponents expect to file their regulatory application this summer, says Hart Searle of Imperial Oil. Construction could begin by the winter of 2006.

Talks nailing down the pipeline route are underway. Myriad applications for roads, gravel pits, compressors and feeder lines are being prepared.

This week's announcement that 15,000 square kilometres will be protected brings to roughly 45,000 square kilometres the total land mass that has been protected from development.

Other areas include the two sites on Great Bear Lake and the Horn Plateau, about 25,000 square kilometres of wetlands and forest about 250 kilometres west of Yellowknife.

This week's addition is an area of rolling hills and lakes west of the Mackenzie River about 800 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife centred along the Ramparts River.

Both the Ramparts River and the Horn Plateau are critical habitat for waterfowl and songbirds across North America.

For Manuel, what's important is that his people will be able to keep stocking their larder and living the way they always have.

"It's full of wildlife," he said. "There's lots of fishing lakes. There's caribou. There's all the ducks we can get. There's everything there."