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Mackenzie Gas Project hearings welcomed

Inuvik—Environmental and social justice groups are welcoming the start of National Energy Board (NEB) hearings today that will determine if construction of the Mackenzie Gas Project (MGP) is in Canada's public interest.

"As an independent quasi-judicial body, the NEB can be expected to carefully review the scientific and technical evidence to determine whether the underground pipelines can be built and operated safely in permafrost environments as rapid climate change warms the North" said Stephen Hazell, conservation director of Sierra Club of Canada. "The NEB will consider whether the negative impacts on northern ecology and society of this \$7.5 billion megaproject exceed the benefits."

"Thirty years ago, the Berger Commission heard directly from our people about the potential impacts of this proposal. Berger concluded that the social impacts of this proposal on Aboriginal people would be devastating, while the economic benefits would be limited." noted Stephen Kakfwi, past Premier of the NWT and advisor to the NWY Protected Areas Strategy. "There are no guarantees that things are going to be different this time around. We are still fighting to preserve our lands, our heritage, and our future as Aboriginal peoples. Economic development has a place, but only on our terms. There must be careful planning to ensure that the land is protected first. There must be full consideration of whether we are in fact any more prepared for this project today than we were 30 years ago. It will be essential for the NEB to once again hear directly from Aboriginal people, and to carefully consider whether our concerns have been addressed.

The NEB must also consider socioeconomic impacts when deciding whether this project should proceed or while determining what terms and conditions to place on the project. "In-migration and the pace of development will have a big impact on the north and the NEB has a very important responsibility to weigh these issues," said Suzette Montreuil of Alternatives North.

"While a separate Joint Review Panel will conduct its own hearings starting in February to assess the environmental effects of the MGP, and then report with recommendations to the NEB by next winter, the NEB will

make the final decisions about how to protect the Mackenzie's natural areas and cultural and ecological values if the MGP proceeds." said Pete Ewins of WWF Canada. "A fundamental condition of any pipeline approval must be that robust land use plans be completed for the NWT portions of the Mackenzie Valley before any major construction begins. Anything less is simply unacceptable for a nation such as Canada with so many strong public commitments to sustainability and new approaches to industrial activity."

Charles Birchall, chair of the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, said "CARC's mapping has shown northerners the potential impact of the choices they will make. We have shown that under some pipeline development scenarios, the land in some regions would be degraded to the extent that it could no longer support important wildlife species, such as caribou. Northerners, and the NEB, need to take this information into account to help guide their choices."

"The NEB must examine very carefully the triggering effect of MGP on other natural gas and oil developments," said Julie Gelfand, president of Nature Canada. "So far, the environmental assessment has been inadequate in measuring the full impact of the project on the lands, water and wildlife of small communities like Colville Lake, which will be overwhelmed by hydrocarbon exploration and development once the MGP is approved, or important bird habitat like the Kendall Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary, which would be permanently damaged."

Sierra Legal Defence Fund is representing World Wildlife Fund and Sierra Club of Canada at the National Energy Board hearings and is providing assisting to other intervenors.

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