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'No significant effects' from dam project: Hydro

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By Aldo Santin

OPPONENTS to the \$800-million Wuskwatim dam failed to produce any persuasive evidence that the project is unnecessary or could jeopardize the north, Manitoba Hydro lawyer Doug Bedford said in his closing arguments before the Clean Environment Commission yesterday.

The electric utility and several spokesmen for the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation were the final speakers as the commission concluded its public hearing portion of the controversial dam review.

"We think (the CEC panel) can recommend the Wuskwatim projects because there are no significant effects," Bedford said. "Effects there will be, but we believe they can be managed."

The panel must produce a report to Conservation Minister Stan Struthers within 90 days on whether it recommends issuing a licence for the construction of the dam and its associated generating and transmission facilities, and what conditions should be imposed on the project.

The dam, on the Burntwood River southwest of Thompson, would be the first new hydro development in Manitoba in 16 years. It's proposed as a joint partnership between Hydro and the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, which will split future profits from export sales to the United States.

The dam is expected to flood an area of about one-half of a square kilometre.

The panel examined the potential economic impacts on Hydro as well as the environmental impacts in the surrounding area and the societal impacts on communities that are expected to be affected by the dam's construction and operation.

Hearing chairman Gerard Lecuyer said the panel heard 32 days of testimony over a 100-day span that began March 1. There have been more than 7,000 pages of transcripts from the hearing, which were posted daily on the commission's website.

The project was questioned by environmentalists and a coalition of the Consumers Association of Canada and the Manitoba Society of Seniors, but it generated deep controversy within the native community. Aboriginal opponents said the band council at Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation were selling out their people's future by partnering with Hydro, whose record of northern hydro development has left a legacy of devastation for several communities and thousands of aboriginal residents.

But several Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation band council members said Hydro is being led by a new generation of leaders who shouldn't be judged on what happened in the past. The council members also said their community's involvement will ensure they can profit from the project and that there will not be a repeat of the environmental disaster that affected their people with the Churchill River Diversion project of the early 1980s.

"We can't continue to use the politics of pity anymore -- it doesn't work," said band Coun. Darcy Linklater. "This is not something to fear... but to embrace."

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