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## Wuskwatim dam clears huge hurdle

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By Helen Fallding

THE Wuskwatim hydro dam in Northern Manitoba -- the province's largest planned construction project -- has cleared one of the final hurdles before work could begin as early as February.

A comprehensive study report prepared by Fisheries Canada and Transport Canada concludes that the nearly \$900-million dam "is not likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects."

The authors took into account measures Manitoba Hydro is planning to compensate for fish habitat loss when 37 hectares of land are flooded behind the 200-megawatt dam on the Burntwood River.

The public has 30 days to comment on the report after it is officially released on Monday.

After reviewing a summary of the feedback, federal Environment Minister Stéphane Dion would normally be expected to make a decision on whether to approve the project within about a month -- by late January.

However, an early federal election could delay that decision, threatening Manitoba Hydro's ability to begin road construction while the ground is still frozen. Clearing land in the summer could make the base for roads and buildings unstable.

The fate of the dam and the \$180-million transmission lines needed to connect it to Manitoba Hydro's grid ultimately rests in the hands of about 2,200 Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation members who live mainly in nearby Nelson House. The land in question is their traditional territory and Hydro has decided not to pursue further dams without the consent of affected First Nations.

If they vote against a proposal to purchase a share of the dam in return for up to a third of the profits, the project is dead.

The plan is controversial among Nisichawayasihk members, some of whom think the investment of about \$24 million is not worth a payoff a generation away. In the first few years after the dam starts producing power, there will be few profits but eventually the First Nation members could earn tens of millions of dollars.

Some people in Nelson House who oppose the dam say they would rather invest in more post-secondary education for young people and in tackling social problems. Some also fear that high-paying jobs will only create more drinking and drug problems among people not accustomed to having much money.

The partnership stands a better chance of being approved if residents of South Indian Lake, who are typically anti-hydro, complete their separation from Nisichawayasihk to create their own First Nation before the vote.

The chief and council in Nelson House, strong supporters of the dam partnership, are hoping to set a date soon for a referendum some time in January.

Community members have not yet seen the final draft of a revenue-sharing agreement with Manitoba Hydro.

Training programs are already well underway to prepare band members and other northern aboriginal people for jobs on the Wuskwatim project, which is more expensive than the Winnipeg floodway expansion.

The northern project is expected to create up to 540 jobs at a time until its completion in about 2011. It was designed to generate export revenue for Manitoba Hydro and the Nisichawayasihk Cree until about 2020, when the growing Manitoba economy may need the power locally.

The first dam Manitoba Hydro has tried to build in 15 years has already passed a review by the Manitoba Clean Environment Commission. Activists who believed the local panel was too closely tied to the Doer government -- which is eager for the dam to be built -- were hoping for a more objective review from the federal government.

Gaile Whelan Enns of Manitoba Wildlands would not comment yesterday because she has not seen a copy of the federal report.

At Manitoba Hydro, spokesman Glenn Schneider said if the report is indeed positive, "we will be delighted, but anything further would be premature at this point."

The federal assessors looked into human health concerns like drinking water quality and fish consumption, along with protection of endangered species, aboriginal hunting and Manitoba Hydro's plans for follow-up once the dam is built.

Copies of the federal assessment will be available at libraries, including at the Manitoba Eco-Network above Mountain Equipment Co-op at 303 Portage Ave. The report should also be posted online Monday at [www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca/010/mb\\_e.htm#csc](http://www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca/010/mb_e.htm#csc).

Wuskwatim would be the 17th generating station in Manitoba Hydro's system, which includes two thermal plants.

The first major northern dam was completed in 1968 at Grand Rapids.

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