

Sahtu fracking approval draws praise and criticism

Some welcome economic development while others worry about environmental impact

[CBC News](#)

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ConocoPhillips Canada is planning to drill this winter after its [exploratory fracking project was approved Tuesday](#) by the Sahtu Land and Water Board.

The company received a land use permit and water licence which will allow the company to drill two horizontal wells.



The Town of Norman Wells, N.W.T., is located close to where companies are exploring for oil and gas in the Sahtu region. The president of the Norman Wells Chamber of Commerce says local companies are happy ConocoPhillips' project was approved. (CBC)

ConocoPhillips Canada spokesperson Eric Hanson says the company is ready to work with nearby communities to mitigate the social toll development can take on small communities.

“In our benefit agreement we signed with the local beneficiaries and the land corporations within the Sahtu district, there is a clause in there that says we will support social programs brought forward by the community,” he said.

“We were in the community last week speaking to chief and council about these issues and how we can work together to address them.”

Hanson says the company is also planning on hiring locals whenever possible.

Chris Buist, president of the Norman Wells Chamber of Commerce, says local companies have invested in new equipment, building up camps and hiring workers in anticipation of the drilling.

But he says the business community was worried it was on the verge of another bust if oil development didn't go ahead.

“We really put all our eggs in this basket and looking forward to it moving forward,” he said.

“We've been definitely on edge and we're elated that it went through. A very positive signal for our region.”

Late last year, a fracking proposal by Shell Canada and MGM Energy was referred to an environmental assessment.

Those companies decided not to proceed with their application to drill.

Buist hopes research gathered when Conoco Phillips does fracking will show it's possible to do fracking safely in the North and encourage other companies to proceed with applications to drill.



Residents of Norman Wells, N.W.T., attend a session on fracking given by the National Energy Board and the territorial government in February. (CBC)

But Weledeh MLA Bob Bromley says he plans to press the Environment Minister for an environmental assessment before drilling begins.

"There are so many unknowns," he said. "We don't have monitoring processes in place; we don't have management processes in place; we don't have policies in place."

The Sahtu Land and Water Board says it's satisfied ConocoPhillips can mitigate any environmental impacts.

It's put a number of conditions on the licences. For example, the company must do a risk assessment on any chemicals used for fracking.

It's also required the company to set aside nearly a million dollars to clean up the site when it's done the work.

Tulita elder David Etchinale says his fears about the unconventional extraction technique remain.

"Fracking will destroy and pollute the land, wildlife and in the future it may even cause earthquakes," he said.

Deborah Simmons, executive director of the Sahtu Renewable Resource Board, says when it comes to fracking, there is a steep learning curve.

"No amount of work done with communities would have been enough," she said.

Simmons says while the board understands the huge potential that comes with development, it has concerns about the effect many new projects all coming online at about the same time will impact wildlife and water.

She says more research needs to be done now to ensure a better understanding of the long-term effects.

Sahtu MLA Norman Yakeleya says he knows the work may take a toll on the environment and could result in more drugs and alcohol in the communities, but he's sure the Sahtu is headed in the right direction. "We're tired of being a has-been region," he said.

The National Energy Board still needs to approve the project. Hanson says that should be done in the next three months.

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