

December 19, 2007

Ms. Tracy Braun
Director, Environmental Assessment & Licensing Branch
Manitoba Conservation
Suite 160, 123 Main Street
Winnipeg, MB R3C 1A5

Mr. Bryan Blunt
Senior Environment Officer
Manitoba Conservation
Environmental Assessment and Licensing Branch
Suite 160, 123 Main Street
Winnipeg MB R3C 1A5

Dear Ms. Braun and Mr. Blunt;

Re: Norway House to Poplar River Winter Road – Environment Act Proposal # 5302

We are providing comments in response to the proposal for winter road construction from Norway House to Poplar River under the Manitoba Environmental Act. Please place our comments, along with all other public comments in the Public Registry. We expect that all public and Departmental comments under the Manitoba Environmental Act will be placed in the public registry. This review under two Acts means comments under the Parks Act will also be placed in the public registry.

We have included our comments on the proposed amendment to the Parks Act concerning the adjustment to Poplar/Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve Land Use Category and attached natural region and the park reserve maps with respect to enduring features and the proposed corridors. Please see our comment concerning winter roads in boreal regions, especially in relation to climate change impacts for communities.

1. Intention for northerner winter roads

There are many unanswered questions regarding the overall plan for winter road use, construction, and decommissioning on the east side of Lake Winnipeg. Information on which roads will receive continual federal funding for maintenance should be made public during this review as it is misleading to the public without full information.

Why does this proposal include the east segment of the winter road in the park reserve, when this road will not be needed? If the old winter road from Poplar River First Nation is to eventually be decommissioned will the rest of that winter road section be decommissioned and is there a decommission plan? We request information on the intended use or decommission of the winter road corridor to the Island Lake communities.

Does the Federal Government intend to maintain and fund two winter roads? Once the winter road to Norway House is in place, is it the government's objective to decommission the old winter road access or are they willing to put a long-term investment into keeping two lengthy stretches of northern winter roads maintained and open (we note that the new route for a winter road from Norway House to Island Lake Communities has been licensed.) Has Indian and Northern Affairs Canada agreed to carry costs of the winter road construction and maintenance for the winter of 2007 and 2008? Are the contracts arranged for construction of this new winter road segment?

2. Enduring Features

The construction of this winter road affects three enduring features unique to the natural region. Enduring features are defined by Manitoba Conservation as a specific combination of soils, geology, climate and landforms that influence biodiversity in each natural region. Representation methodology adopted by Manitoba and enunciated in its Action Plan for a Network of Protected Areas is used to assess how each protected area represents biological diversity via enduring features, in its natural region. The Conservation Minister has recently indicated that the standards, goals, and objectives in Manitoba's Action Plan for a Network of Protected Areas continue as Manitoba policy.

The proposed winter road would adversely affect three enduring features (BR/Y23, DB/Y23, and OD/Y23) and their contribution to representation of this natural region. Linear disturbance from the Access LUC would bisect enduring features not found elsewhere within the Poplar/Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve and could ultimately cancel their representation in Natural Region 4c. This in turn reduces representation for the natural region. Please see attached maps, which provide Manitoba Conservation enduring features information for the park reserve, and for the natural region.

What steps will be taken by Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation to avoid risk and undue environmental impact on the Winter Road Access corridor within Poplar/Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve? Previous adjustments to winter road corridors on the east side of Lake Winnipeg included an Environmental Impact Assessment. Will an EIA be done for the proposed winter road in 2008? We request the schedule of the Environmental Assessment to be made public as soon as possible.

Due to lack of information for this review, deadline December 19, 2007, it is impossible to determine the degree of impact due to linear disturbance (winter road construction). Therefore at this time it must be assumed that the two km wide corridor will be an impact zone.

3. Two Kilometer Width

We request information for the winter road survey and construction schedule to be made public immediately. It has come to our attention by Manitoba Conservation that the 2 km wide Winter Road Access corridor has been proposed since Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation has not surveyed and located the route of the winter road as of yet. This has resulted in a proposed Access LUC that is over 4 times the width of the largest corridor in any other Provincial Park in Manitoba with the majority of Access Corridors measuring less than 100 meters in width.

If a 2 km wide corridor is required for optimum route selection for a 30 – 60 meter wide route then the route should be selected in advance so the LUC change is only for the winter road route. A 2 km wide access corridor is excessive for a 9-12 meter wide road, and is unprecedented in any Provincial Parks in Manitoba. If other purposes or uses are intended for this proposed Access LUC, these should be made public at the time of public review, and before the decision for licensing.

Does the Manitoba government intend to place a 2 km wide winter road corridor for the rest of the winter road involved, north and south of the park reserve? This would be a considerable impact to great stretches of Boreal Forest and we would remind Manitoba Conservation that linear disturbance cannot be ignored, as the conservation biology effect is well documented. Winter roads themselves are linear disturbances.

4. Problem with Environment Proposal Access to Information

We have determined that the links on the Manitoba Government web site for this proposal only included the Parks Act information. No electronic access to the Transportation department documents was provided. The combination of incomplete posting and linking, in addition to the what must be taken as a refusal to provide electronic copies of planning materials creates barriers to the ability of communities and the citizens to respond to a formal review and comments process under the Act. Perhaps it is necessary to remind the Transportation planning branch that in order to print their planning document, all elements were electronic!

5. Review of *Proposed Norway House-Poplar River First Nation Winter Road*

Due to limited time and access to this planning document ('project description and preliminary environmental assessment') we are providing initial comments in page number order below. An overview comment would be that this document has a variety of errors of fact, and very few resources or sources were accessed to write the material. We note that Manitoba government protected areas (Protected Areas Initiative) sources are not cited.

Description of the Development:

V – All previous studies and activities were *not* accessed or described. Manitoba Hydro holds significant data, including of a biophysical nature that was not identified. These lands and waters are a future corridor focus for Manitoba Hydro, and are included in one of three future corridors studied extensively by the utility. Manitoba Conservation has conducted ecological representation analysis regarding these lands, especially for Belanger River ASI. There are no references or sources regarding Manitoba's Protected Areas Initiative included.

IX – There is no clear information included to show how spills of pollutants would be contained in the winter road corridor.

VIII – Information is incomplete, little due diligence shown regarding species that may be impacted and incorrect information included.

Manitoba Wildlands continues the work of WWF Canada and Nature Canada for new Manitoba Protected Areas.

Page 1, Section 2.0

This technical document appears not to correlate with the Manitoba Conservation materials for public review regarding this winter road proposal, under the Parks Act. No information is provided here as to the width of the corridor. See comments on maps.

Figure 2 MAP

As per comment above, this map is not clear as to the width of the winter road corridor. Is it 2 km plus the width of the winter road? The map also fails to show the existing winter road network – why? There is an incomplete scope for the park reserve, and it appears that the existing winter road corridor on the east side of the park reserve is not part of this proposal. Why then is a 2 km wide designation also being placed on the eastern section of winter road under the Parks Act?

Figure 4 MAP

This map should be a vegetation map, and the scale from the NTS grid used should be specified. Sources of data, date, and clear indication who produced each map should be provided for each map.

Figure 5 MAP

See comments above

Figure 6

Clearly there are woodland caribou in the study area, based on this map. Government staffs who have not accessed other sources of information must also avoid basing all observations on the lands management plan. See comments above. It is also important to note in such technical documents, in a precautionary mode, that we simply do not have complete information regarding the study area. Lack of data does not mean there are no constraints, impacts etc.

Figure 7 MAP

There seems to be an effort to try to prove there are no woodland caribou in the study area. We would refer the regulators to national studies regarding woodland caribou, and the previous woodland caribou strategy for Manitoba, and previous maps. There is to date no satisfactory explanation as to why Manitoba has suddenly fewer woodland caribou herds.

Figure 8 MAP

This map proves that Transportation Manitoba staff did not access any Protected Areas Initiative information. We have not seen the Belanger ASI on a map for several years. Poplar /Nanowin River Park Reserve is NOT an ASI.

Page 17, Section 3.6

This text shows an absence of knowledge about Poplar River First Nation, its economy, and its governance system. We would recommend that this kind of language should always be checked for accuracy with the affected First Nation. We are sure that a variety of corrections would have been

made, had that courtesy been offered. Text refers to Norway House location on the Nelson River however maps do not show Nelson River.

Page 18, Section 4.2

The statement at the bottom of the page regarding woodland caribou is not accurate. This species has been listed under MESA for about 18 months. We assume that no effort was made to determine the validity of this statement: "...no other species of special conservation significance have been identified within the project study area." This is not just a federal responsibility. Was the conservation data centre for Manitoba contacted? Was data from various Manitoba Hydro studies accessed? The premise is inaccurate, therefore the conclusion is inaccurate.

Page 21, Section 5.2

The statements that increased pressure on the fishery, use of the winter road corridor for hunting access, etc need further study. Given the intent to study the winter road situation – and determine whether bridges will be needed in the future – we recommend that more thorough environmental assessment be undertaken should bridges be needed in the future.

Page 21-22, Section 5.3

There is an absence of information about large carnivores, range size, and potential impacts from this corridor. Black bears, moose, elk all use these lands and waters. We are also concerned that no research has been done regarding wolverine. First Nations and lands users on the east side voice concern for the wolverine – which is listed as a species of concern. Mammals and ungulates live in ranges together, and are interdependent. This means that species usual in Black bear and moose ranges can be affected if their larger cousins are affected. Wolverines are considered to be an indicator species across the boreal. Again, a lack of due diligence is evident.

Page 22, Section 5.4

See our comments above. This park reserve is NOT an ASI. The Premier of Manitoba has committed to permanent protection of this park reserve. Much of this information does not relate to the specific location of this proposal, and the aspirations and needs of this First Nation.

Figure 9 MAP

See comments above.

Does the Manitoba government intend to have 2 km wide corridors for the rest of the winter road network on the east side?

Page 25, Section 10.0

It is good to see an indication that this proposal is not intended to become a permanent all weather road – and that specific steps in assessment would be needed should that be an option in the future.

Climate Change

We note there is little reference to the impacts of this project on climate and no references to impact of climate on this project. The Manitoba Climate Change Task Force 2001 recommendations specified that all future project proposals would include these factors. It is overdue for the Environment Act Proposal Form to require specific information. Examples include: amount of carbon displaced by the project, amount of emissions from construction, mitigation to replace carbon, etc. We note that there is no clear information as to amount of peatlands or muskeg in the region or information as to impact on this resource.

Table 4

The tendency here appears to be mitigation during construction. Little assessment of long term impacts, or mitigation, and no climate change content. Much of the content appears to be based on construction, and operational periods for the winter road season, while ignoring the corridor the rest of the year.

We note that unlike other east side winter road proposals there is no reference to accessing traditional knowledge in order to plan this winter road. That is unfortunate, as Poplar River First Nation is rich in land use, and traditional knowledge.

Manitoba Wildlands supports the need for better primary and additional secondary winter roads for Manitoba First Nations facing climate change. We also support improved technical assessments and environmental assessment work for winter roads. As our mandate indicates we support protected lands establishment – especially First Nation nomination; representation of enduring features in each natural region, and the undertaking to see these lands part of the listing for a new boreal World Heritage Site in Manitoba and Ontario.

Yours truly,



Gaile Whelan Enns
Director, Manitoba Wildlands

Attachments:

Dec 14, 2007 letter Re: Land Use Category change within Poplar / Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve

Map – Enduring Features in Eco Region 4c Lac Seul Uplands

Map – Enduring Features in Poplar/Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve

Copy to H Hernandez and Ken Schykulski