

Backgrounder Document d'information



Ministry of Natural Resources

Ministère des Richesses naturelles

December 22, 2005

PROPOSAL TO BUILD A WINTER ROAD BETWEEN PEAWANUCK AND FORT SEVERN

The Weenusk First Nation in Peawanuck wants to build a winter road through a portion of Polar Bear Provincial Park. The road would link Peawanuck to Fort Severn, and would provide a safer, more reliable route for transportation of supplies to Peawanuck at a reasonable cost this winter.

Peawanuck is located at the southern tip of Hudson Bay, about 30 kilometres inland on the Winisk River and about 400 kilometres north of Kashechewan. Peawanuck and Fort Severn are the two most northerly communities in Ontario. Peawanuck is on the edge of Polar Bear Provincial Park, about 150 kilometres southeast of Fort Severn.

Safety and Socio-economic Values

- There is an existing 258-kilometre winter road between Fort Severn and Peawanuck. It runs through an area outside the boundaries of Polar Bear Provincial Park, but presents a number of construction difficulties and safety concerns. For example, insufficient freezing of ice on the many water crossings along the route has resulted in equipment going through the ice in the past. The main area of concern is the lakes area at the southwest corner of the park.
- The proposed new shorter route is about 180 kilometres long – 123 kilometres of which run through the park. Most of the proposed route follows an existing snowmobile route traditionally used by the Weenusk First Nation.
- This proposed route through part of the park is not only shorter, but safer and more reliable. It would allow Peawanuck to bring in supplies that currently must be transported by air. This winter, the community anticipates using the winter road to bring in fuel, non-perishable food, wind turbines, greenhouse-building material and other building materials.
- Air transportation is an alternative, but is very expensive. Using air transportation greatly increases the cost of living for the people of Peawanuck. For example, the community's electricity is produced using a diesel generator. Shipping costs for diesel fuel increase electricity costs to about 60 cents a kilowatt hour, compared to 8 or 9 cents a kilowatt hour in the rest of the province.
- Other necessities such as non-perishable food, building supplies and fuel for boat motors, all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles tend to cost five to ten times what they would cost in Toronto or other southern Ontario towns.

- A reliable winter road through the park would help defray the cost of supplies, improve the standard of living, and result in improved health for individuals and the community as a whole, as well as more economic opportunities for the people of Peawanuck.

Environmental Values

- Polar Bear Provincial Park was established in 1970 to protect sub-arctic and low arctic landscapes. The park provides opportunities for low-intensity wilderness recreation, scientific research and traditional land and resource use by First Nations people.
- The park management plan recognizes the socio-economic needs of Peawanuck and integrates the traditional use of the park by First Nations people with development and management strategies to ensure the integrity of this sensitive environment is not compromised.
- The Ministry of Natural Resources has evaluated the potential impact of the construction and use of the winter road for species at risk, terrestrial wildlife, significant natural heritage features, soil and water quality, aquatic ecosystems, permafrost, spills or contamination, natural vegetation and terrestrial habitat. It has been noted that this winter road would likely see limited use due to the high cost of fuel and its seasonal nature,
- The proposed road travels through an area where polar bear maternity dens are concentrated. A small number of active dens could be affected by road construction. There are few wolverines in the area and their numbers have been known to decline near roadways. Woodland caribou may temporarily avoid some of their natural habitat areas while road construction is being carried out.
- Measures have been identified to reduce any potential effects. These measures include:
 - avoiding known polar bear den sites
 - developing and implementing best practices when active dens are encountered
 - maintaining sustainable harvest levels for wildlife species
 - following design and construction guidelines for ice roads and bridges
 - maintaining existing vegetation as much as possible
 - following guidelines and laws for transport of fuel and other dangerous goods.
- Any potential environmental impacts would be addressed through conditions associated with other approvals or processes.
- MNR has worked with the First Nation to identify a route that would reduce any potential negative impacts on polar bears.
- The Hudson Bay Lowland ecosystem will continue to be monitored to assess impacts of the winter road.

Legislation and/or Approvals Required

- The road will require a work permit under the Public Lands Act for the area outside Polar Bear Provincial Park and a letter of authorization by the superintendent of the park (issued under the Provincial Parks Act) for the area of the road inside the park.
- Approval would include conditions to address any environmental concerns. These conditions include:
 - restrictions on the width of the road
 - use of materials and construction practices to reduce negative impacts on the environment
 - preserving existing vegetation
 - preventing disruption of fish habitat
 - restrictions on when the road may be used.
- The project requires approval from the Ministry of the Environment. MNR has requested a declaration order under the Environmental Assessment Act for the full length of the road inside the park and on Crown lands outside the park. The proposal is posted on the Environmental Registry for 30 days for public comment.
- MNR would need to revise the management plan for Polar Bear Provincial Park to allow construction of a road through the park.
- The project is subject to screening under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act prior to release of funding for the winter road from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Past Consultation

- Discussions with the local First Nation communities regarding winter road access to the community of Peawanuck have been ongoing for more than 10 years.
- A band council resolution supporting construction of the existing winter road (outside the park) from Peawanuck to Fort Severn was passed by the Weenusk First Nation (Peawanuck) in February 2003.
- The Fort Severn First Nation has sent letters supporting construction of the route from Peawanuck to Fort Severn, as proposed by the Weenusk First Nation.

-30-

Contact:
 Karen Bellamy
 Wildlife Section
 705-755-1727

Disponible en français

www.mnr.gov.on.ca