



Mackenzie Valley Gas Pipeline – Sustainability Assessment

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Abstract: Global climate change caused by burning of fossil fuels and changing land use is arguably the defining challenge for humanity in the 21st century. Canada's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have steadily increased since the Government of Canada first committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) 20 years ago. Federal environmental assessments have largely been ineffective in reducing GHG emissions associated with assessed development projects over this period, partly due to the legislated narrow focus on determining the significance of identified adverse environmental effects.

In pursuing its sustainability assessment, the MGP Panel asked the question: Would the project make a positive contribution to ecological, economic and social sustainability? as well as asking whether the project's adverse environmental effects caused by the MGP would be significant as required by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA). The paper argues that the MGP Panel understood that the adverse effects on global climate and ecosystems resulting from the GHG emissions emitted by any one large development project would never be significant and thus that this legislated test is not helpful as a way to reduce a project's GHG emissions.

The MGP Panel's sustainability assessment went beyond the legislated test, examining five key sustainability issues: cumulative biophysical effects, cumulative socio-economic effects, equity effects, legacy and bridging, and cumulative impacts management and preparedness. The Panel concluded that to be truly sustainable, the need for up-front control of pace and scale of upstream development induced by the MGP; and end-uses of the natural gas (e.g., whether or not MGP gas would be used to displace more carbon-intensive fuels) were issues that needed to be addressed.

Summary: Sustainability assessment is emerging as an important approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to be generated in association with development projects subject to Canadian environmental assessment processes. The paper discusses the leading application of sustainability assessment in Canada to date --the Joint Panel Review for the \$US 16 billion Mackenzie Gas Project concluded in December 2009, and argues for broad implementation of sustainability assessment for development projects in Canada.