

B.C. First Nation says No to more than \$1B in first stage of LNG vote

Posted by Joan Russow
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PORT SIMPSON, B.C. - The first of three votes on a natural gas benefit offer worth over \$1 billion has been unanimously rejected by a First Nation on British Columbia's northwest coast.

All of the more than 180 eligible voters at a meeting in Port Simpson stood up to oppose the plan to build a liquefied-natural-gas pipeline and terminal in their territory, said Lax Kw'alaams band member Malcolm Sampson.

Pacific NorthWest LNG, which is mostly owned by Malaysia-based oil and gas giant Petronas, has applied to build an export terminal on Lelu Island, just south of Prince Rupert at the head of the Skeena River.

Residents have raised concerns over the project's environmental impact, citing the site's problematic location and the threat it poses to the watershed.

"Why would you build an LNG plant right at the mouth of the Skeena River?" said Sampson, who spoke at Tuesday's meeting. "There of all places."

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Sampson said the \$1.15-billion offer in benefits over 40 years was not discussed at all during the meeting, which took place in a school gym so packed that some band members had to stand outside.

"Too much was at stake to wipe out a whole river," said the father of eight and grandfather of 20. He described the atmosphere at the meeting, where both proponents and the band council made presentations, as "very tense."

Luanne Roth of the T. Buck Suzuki Foundation said an estimated 60 per cent of the Skeena estuary's eel grass is located immediately off Lelu Island, which she described as critical salmon habitat.

"It's in the worst place they could have chosen in the whole north coast," she said of the proposed LNG site.

Information posted on the band's website notes the proposal would provide an initial \$27.8 million. Annual payments would then begin at nearly \$13 million and end with \$50.5 million in the 40th year.

The deal would provide 2,200 hectares of land in the Prince Rupert harbour area, worth about \$108 million, and would promise jobs for qualified Tsimshian workers.

Further information on the site says that in exchange, Lelu Island and its traditional plants and medicines would be off limits to Lax Kw'alaams members. As many as 431 culturally modified trees could be destroyed if the deal goes ahead, it adds.

About 120 kilometres of the pipeline would rest on the seabed, which, the document says, could negatively impact fish and their habitat, alter access to traditional fishing grounds and contaminate seafood through dredging.

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The remaining members of the 3,700-strong band will have an opportunity to vote following two information sessions in Prince Rupert and Vancouver over the coming week.

Lax Kw'alaams Mayor Garry Reece said the band council would not comment on the outcome of the initial vote until members living outside of Port Simpson have had an opportunity to cast their ballots.

Pacific NorthWest LNG president Michael Culbert declined comment but thanked the Lax Kw'alaams council for the invitation to present to the community.

"Out of respect to the ongoing process overseen by mayor and council, it is premature and improper to comment further," Culbert said an email.

Port Simpson resident Donnie Wesley, who voted no on Tuesday, said his people wanted to send a clear message to the provincial and federal governments that his community takes environmental issues seriously.

"It was a proud moment for our people," said the lifelong fisherman. "We stood our ground."

— By Geordon Omand in Vancouver

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