NORTHWEST INSTITUTE
FOR BIOREGIONAL RESEARCH

PO Box 2781, Smithers, BC, Canada, V0J 2N0
Tel (250) 847-9693 • **Email** pmossnwi@bulkley.net • **Website** northwestinstitute.ca

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JANUARY 6, 2012

Pipeline panel receives evidence that an oil spill in the Morice River would devastate steelhead and salmon runs.

(Smithers) An oil pipeline rupture in the upper Morice watershed would be devastating for salmon and steelhead, and proposed cleanup techniques would be ineffective, according to the Northwest Institute for Bioregional Research. Those are among the findings contained in a report the Institute has submitted as evidence in the Joint Review Panel hearings into the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline, which begins next week.

The report can be downloaded at www.NorthwestInstitute.ca

"Exposing the Morice River's critical fish habitat to the threat of a major oil spill is simply unthinkable," said Northwest Institute executive director Pat Moss. "We hope our report will help the panel better understand what is at stake for our salmon and steelhead."

Written by fisheries biologist Dave Bustard and hydrologist Mike Miles, the report uses data from Enbridge's 2010 application as well as local scientific knowledge to examine the implications of a pipeline rupture and clean-up efforts to river processes, fish and fish habitat.

The report focuses on a 34-kilometre stretch of the pipeline route that runs adjacent to the Morice River, south of Smithers. In this area, the river's floodplain contains numerous secondary channels, log jams and wetlands that provide fish with critical spawning and rearing habitat.

Among the report's key findings:

• A pipeline rupture would quickly spread hydrocarbons throughout the area river and would contaminate important fish habitat in log jams, side channels, and shoreline areas.

• Parts of the spilled oil would be immediately toxic to fish and developing eggs, while the heavier components of the bitumen would have chronic effects on salmon eggs and juvenile salmon for many years.

• The pipeline's capacity is so large that even if valves were closed immediately at the time of rupture, a large volume of oil could still drain into the environment.

• Water velocities in the Morice River over much of the year exceed Enbridge's own criteria for using conventional containment booms, absorbents and skimmers. Ice conditions would hamper cleanup during winter periods of lower stream flow.

• The area in question is remote, has poor access, and is comprised of a complex network of log jams and secondary channels. It would be impractical to effectively contain or recover oil once it has entered the river.

• Remedial actions that might be taken following a spill, such as collecting oil-covered debris and sediments and removal to decontamination sites, or burning oiled debris on gravel bars, could cause long-term habitat impacts.

"It is our opinion that diluted bitumen attached to debris and accumulated in the spawning gravels and shoreline sediments would persist and affect salmon and steelhead survival in Morice River for an extended period. There do not appear to be any proven techniques for effectively mitigating these impacts," states the report.

The Morice River, one of over 600 fish-bearing streams the pipeline would cross, supports the largest runs of chinook salmon and summer steelhead in the Skeena watershed. It draws sport anglers from around the world each year, and is the principal salmon spawning area within the traditional territory of the Wet'suwet'en, who have fished its runs for at least 6,000 years.

A different report released by the Bulkley Valley Research Center earlier this year identified the Morice River section of the pipeline route as being subject to slope instability that could lead to a pipeline rupture.

Contact:
Pat Moss, Northwest Institute - (250) 847-9693
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