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Key Mackenzie Pipeline Report Expected Dec. 31

(Reuters) - A long-delayed regulatory report on the \$16.2 billion Mackenzie gas pipeline from Canada's Arctic is likely to be released on Dec. 31, the Northwest Territories' industry minister said Tuesday.

The report, to be issued by the Joint Review Panel examining the environmental, socioeconomic and cultural impact of the project, is needed before the **National Energy Board** can rule on whether the line can proceed.

The panel itself said a year ago the report was likely to be issued in December 2009, more than two years after public hearings into the project wrapped up.

N.W.T. Industry Minister **Robert McLeod** said the territorial government is assured the panel's findings will be issued at month's end.

"We've been told it will be Dec. 31," McLeod told reporters in Calgary.

Staff for the panel could not confirm the date but expected to issue a notice, likely later this week, setting out the time of the report's release.

"That will indicate when, where and how the report will be released," said **Brian Chambers**, executive director of the Northern Gas Project Secretariat.

The planned project, whose partners include **Imperial Oil Ltd.**, **Royal Dutch Shell**, **ConocoPhillips**, **Exxon Mobil Corp.** and **Aboriginal Pipeline Group**, would carry up to 1.9 bcf of gas per day 1,220 kilometres through the Northwest Territories from fields under the Mackenzie River Delta in the Arctic, linking to existing pipelines further south.

The backers said they have not been told of the planned Dec. 31 release date for the JRP report.

"The only thing that we've heard has been consistent with a National Energy Board release that indicated we should expect the report by the end of December 2009," said **Pius Rolheiser**, a spokesman for Imperial Oil, the lead partner on the project. "We have had no more recent guidance than that."

The NEB said in October that if the report was released on time, it expected to hold final hearings on the project in April 2010 and should make a decision on the line in September.

The line is considered a key driver of economic growth for the Northwest Territories, whose resource-based economy has been hard-hit by the recession.

"We want to see the pipeline constructed," McLeod said. "It's very important for the North."