

Nearly half B.C. residents support Northern Gateway: poll

Lauren Krugel – January 8th, 2012



Nearly half of British Columbians support Enbridge Inc's (ENB-T 37.51-0.28-0.74%) proposed Northern Gateway project, which would pass through the province, according to an Ipsos Reid poll conducted on behalf of the pipeline company.

The survey, released Thursday, suggests 48 per cent of B.C. residents back the controversial \$5.5-billion project – 14 per cent of those strongly. On the flip side, 32 per cent oppose it – 13 per cent strongly.

About 20 per cent of respondents said they were “undecided” on the proposed project.

ForestEthics, one of the most vehement critics of Northern Gateway, quickly dismissed the Ipsos Reid poll as “bogus,” citing an independent survey by Forum Research last month that found half of Canadians oppose the project.

Northern Gateway would carry some 525,000 barrels per day of Alberta crude to the West Coast for export to Asian countries. A much smaller parallel line would bring diluent – used to make oil sands bitumen thin enough to flow through pipelines – from the coast to Alberta.

Regulatory hearings into Northern Gateway begin next week in Kitimat, B.C., and the process is expected to take about two years, with more than 4,000 people set to speak.

There has been vocal opposition to the project from First Nations, environmental and other groups, though Thursday's poll suggests that sentiment may not be as widespread as has been thought.

The biggest benefits cited by supporters in the survey had to do with the economy and employment, while detractors said environmental harm and the risk of spills and leaks topped their concerns.

Only four in 10 British Columbians said they were familiar with the project, with awareness higher amongst northern residents and older respondents.

Support was highest among northern residents, at 55 per cent. The line would run through the north of the province, so those communities would be most affected.

The poll of 1,000 British Columbians, taken between Dec. 12 and Dec. 15, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

Energy campaigner Nikki Skuce said she takes issue with Ipsos Reid asking respondents whether they support an "underground pipeline" between Alberta and the West Coast, but making no mention of the fact that the line would carry oil sands crude, deemed by some to be more environmentally harmful than other types.

"It's not just a pipeline, and we plan to ensure the public is fully aware of the true environmental and social costs on both ends of the pipeline," Ms. Skuce said in a statement.

Eric Swanson, with another Northern Gateway opponent, the Dogwood Initiative, said polling results vary depending on how questions are asked.

"In this case, the question of support for the pipeline is somewhat divorced from the threat of an oil spill," he said in a statement.

"What today's poll indicates is that some people aren't automatically connecting this project to the increased threat of oil spills. The big question is whether people are willing to take that risk with their coast."