

PIPELINE EXPLORATION ASKED

TAPS Requesting to Explore North of the Yukon This Summer

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The Trans Alaska Pipeline System has requested permission from the Bureau of Land Management to do extensive exploration work along the proposed route of the pipeline north of the Yukon River this summer, a spokesman of the agency said in Anchorage last Wednesday.

Before making a decision, the BLM is awaiting a detailed proposal from TAPS outlining how and exactly where the oil companies plan to explore.

The Bureau, Henry Noldan said, has not, in the past, allowed exploration in the summer north of the Yukon River because the ground is thawed and thus can be easily damaged. Noldan is a BLM supervisor for the pipeline project.

If the work is allowed, he speculated that it would probably be on a very restrictive basis.

TAPS officials, he continued, want the exploration data as soon as possible in order to expedite the pipeline project. The Department of the Interior, which bears the responsibility for issuing a construction permit for the pipeline, has reportedly said that it does not have enough information to make a decision on the matter.

The BLM was given the authority by the Secretary of the Interior about a year ago to al-

low TAPS to explore for the pipeline, the supervisor said. And the BLM spokesman continued, under this same authority the agency can allow TAPS to do exploration this summer.

The consortium of eight oil companies did some preliminary exploration work north of the Yukon River about a year ago but has not done any since that time. Then, Noldan explained, the work was done in the winter and consisted of drilling holes about every 6 miles and cutting a preliminary line for the pipeline.

Now, he added, TAPS wants to go back and do more drilling and make a more definite determination as to the best pipeline route. Such exploration was conducted all winter in the Copper River Basin, where the route of the pipeline has now been pretty much determined by the oil companies he said.

TAPS did not ask for permission to explore north of the Yu-

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kon River last winter, Noldan said, because it was largely concerned about the road to accompany the pipeline.

TAPS' request raises many questions about the role of the Bureau of Land Management in the construction of the pipeline and haul road.

According to Noldan, the BLM is responsible for protecting public lands, which most of the pipeline will cross north of the Yukon River.

Thus, he added, the agency is concerned about how TAPS will move the pipeline to the construction site, where they will put the road, where they will put the pipeline, and how they will move material for the construction of the road.

Concerning drilling this summer, the engineer stressed that he would like to see a lull until next fall because there is not much that can be done without tearing up the soil in the summer.

Drilling usually involves a tracked vehicle with the drilling equipment, a caterpillar to assist the vehicle in rough places, and a personnel carrier vehicle — all weighing a total of about 30,000 pounds.

TAPS, he added, has tentatively proposed sending 15 to 20 such units north of the Yukon this summer.

Noldan went on to discuss some of the dangers that would be presented by such a team.

To cross the numerous streams in the area, a CAT would have to cut down stream banks and could possibly damage wildlife in the stream. Permafrost might be exposed as the equipment tears up the earth in its path. And, trees will have to be knocked down.

During the summer, fires are a real hazard and a spark from the machinery or a cigarette butt accidentally tossed to the ground could damage many acres of land.

A lull during the summer, Noldan added, would guard against such dangers and close examination of the plans for the proposed haul road.

TAPS has proposed where it would extract the gravel for the haul road along the proposed route, but the BLM has not looked to see if the gravel is there and if it can be extracted without damaging the environment, he said. The exact site of the gravel pits has not been determined and a method for excavating the sites so that they are hidden from the road has not been agreed upon, Noldan added.

BLM engineer, James Hender-shot, explained that TAPS and the BLM learned quite a bit in

the construction of the recently completed 55-mile road from Livingood to the Yukon River.

The contractors learned to stay away from permafrost, which runs in streaks, as much as possible and now know better how to work with it when necessary. The BLM, he added, realized the need to closely supervise clearing for the road and opening of the gravel pits in order to minimize damage to the land.

The construction companies, Noldan said, will eventually be required to smooth over and revegetate the areas from which the gravel was taken. Possibly, the Bureau has said, some of these cleared areas can later be used for recreation and camping sites.

Noldan stressed that any road built to accommodate large trucks carrying pipeline equipment would be durable enough for campers to use after the pipeline is completed.

For construction of the pipeline south of Fairbanks, TAPS has planned to use existing highways — mainly the Richardson Highway, he said. Such a plan will require the construction of feeder roads from the pipeline to the main highway. Noldan added that the BLM has asked TAPS for information on the location of these feeders but has not yet received any.

Another area of concern for the BLM has been the construction camps along the proposed route of the pipeline.

When it appeared that the permit for the road north of the Yukon would be issued, the BLM issued eight camp permits at various intervals along the route. Most of the camps are now complete and have sufficient equipment to finish the haul road. The BLM recently took a group of newsmen on a plane trip along the route of the pipeline and stopped in the Dietrich Camp in the Brooks Range for a first-hand look. There, as at other camps, heavy machinery was lined up, standing idle waiting for construction on the road to begin.

At the camp designed to handle about 300 men, only 40 were there.

Most of these are putting finishing touches on the camp. During the winter, the center line for the road was surveyed and some soil samplings were taken for the road. In these camps the BLM is responsible for seeing that both the exploration and construction work on the camps damage the tundra as little as possible.

One supervisor handles each of five construction companies stretched from the Yukon River to Prudhoe Bay, and thus in most cases, has a large amount of territory to cover. Green Construction Company has three camps and Burgess Construction Company two, but both have only one supervisor apiece. The staff, Noldan said, will need to be increased to seven 3-man crews once the road construction starts. TAPS, he added, is supposed to reimburse the BLM for the costs of this supervision, but no agreement has been worked out yet.

Under the BLM permit system, when the road and pipeline are built, the camps will be pulled out, and the companies will have to restore the land or act as otherwise authorized. They can pull out their utilities system and housing facilities, which are basically large mobile units, but much or part of the facilities might be left behind for camping areas.