

Environmental study on Great Whale **hydro** project is due next week

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Hydro-Québec will release a massive \$400-million environmental study Tuesday on the Great Whale energy project in Northern **Quebec**.

The 4,500-page document will set in motion a review process, including public hearings, which could become the most complex — and controversial — ever held on a **hydro**-electric project in this country, **Hydro** president Armand Couture said yesterday.

Decision not binding

"With the tabling of this report, **Hydro-Québec** will make public the most complete environmental-impact study ever done on such a project in Canada," Couture said in an interview.

"The federal and provincial governments as well as the Cree and the Inuit of northern **Quebec** can now decide whether Great Whale is environmentally sound."

However, Couture was quick to add that **Hydro-Québec** won't consider any negative decision to be legally binding.

The utility might still go ahead and build the \$13-billion project which would flood 1,667 square kilometres of Cree land on the Great Whale River.

"We believe Great Whale is necessary for the economic future of all the people of **Quebec**," he said.

"It will definitely be built. Our main goal now is to wait for the Cree to sit down and negotiate a deal that will be good for both them and us."

The Cree say such a deal is highly unlikely.

They admit the release of **Hydro's** huge environmental study is a smart move.

But they also have plans of their own.

"It's a good political ploy for Hydro-Québec to release a study of this magnitude and appear to give the review process the power to decide on Great Whale," said Susanne Hilton, a **scientist** hired by the Grand Council of the Cree to fight the study.

"For the time being, nobody can charge that **Hydro** is forcing Great Whale down the throats of the Cree and the Inuit of northern **Quebec**."

However, Hilton said **Hydro** will now have to stand up and defend

the data in its own report.

"Our team of **scientists** will go up against their team of **scientists** to debate whether **Hydro's** data is biased to prove that Great Whale should be built," she said.

Hilton said the review process probably will become long and tedious.

"These things are so cumbersome and there's so much information to wade through that I can't see it ending before two years," she said.

Emotional campaign

In the meantime, **Hydro** isn't planning to just sit back. The utility will keep on lobbying politicians and business clients in the United States about the future benefits of Great Whale.

"I compare the opposition to Great Whale to the campaign against the Newfoundland seal hunt," Couture said.

"Our critics are using completely emotional and often erroneous information to turn the American public against us."

"We would be foolish not to react."

Couture would not confirm or deny reports that **Hydro** spent \$2.6

million on lobbying and public relations campaigns in the New England states, New York and Washington last year.

But he would say that the world's largest public relations firm, Bur-

son-Marsteller in New York, is still on Hydro's payroll to do "discreet lobbying" with state legislators and members of the Clinton administration in Washington.

"We know, for example, that the

Clinton administration is very environmentally sensitive, so it's in our interest to monitor their point of view," said Couture.

"We're sure our logic will prevail in the end."

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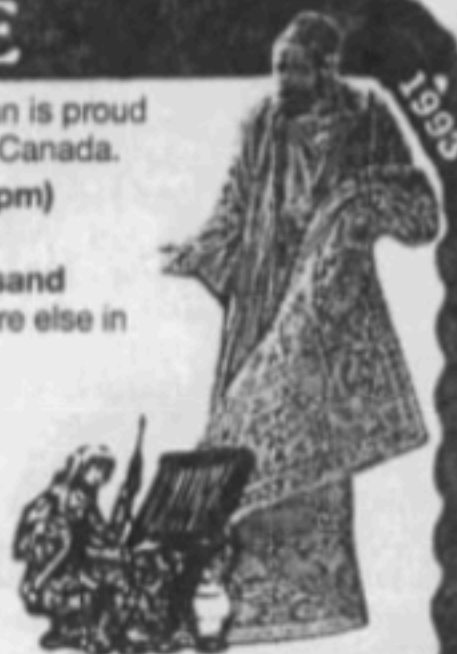
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