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Ministries considering panel review for Prosperity project

By Jeremy Deutsch Tribune Staff Writer

Both levels of government are talking.

That's the word from both the provincial and federal Environment Ministries as they set out to define the parameters of the environmental assessment for the Prosperity project.

Taseko Mines was hoping to get the guidelines by Dec. 15 but the complexity of the process might not allow for that to happen by then. Both the feds and the province have a number of things to work out before it can proceed, but they both insist they are working on it. Gary Alexander, project director for Prosperity with the BC Environmental Assessment Office is aware of **Taseko's** interest in moving forward and getting certainty in the process, but he couldn't say what that dat will be.

"Both levels of government are interested in getting clarity around the process as well both are in discussion with respect to that," Alexander says.

A number of local politicians and stakeholders have called for a speedy decision on the EA process.

Right now the BCEAO is looking at either a joint panel review or separate panel review.

That final decision would rest in the hands of the Environment Minister.

While no one could say for sure, it appears the EA is heading for a joint panel review.

"It's a matter of agreement between the two governments on how they want to proceed," Alexander says.

If the joint panel process were accepted, both governments would then agree to terms of reference and pick the panel members together.

Panel members would likely be appointed based on their expertise and experience in mining and EAs.

Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency is working on behalf of the federal government in the process.

Right now Prosperity is in the comprehensive study phase but at some point the federal Minister of Environment must make a decision to leave the project in its current phase or push it to the panel review.

"Right now we're in discussions with BCEAO to explore the possibility of establishing a joint panel," says Nicholas Girard of the CEAA.

If it goes to a panel, public hearings will be held at some point during the process.

Girard says the Prosperity project touches three federal ministries, including The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Transport Canada and Natural Resources Canada, but he adds it is not unusual for a project this size to do so.

His agency and the three departments are holding preliminary consultation with First Nations in the area.

Girard was unaware of **Taseko's** Dec. 15 timeline but he says once a decision is made by the minister it will be promptly announced.

The Prosperity Project is a copper and gold mine at Fish Lake, 125 kilometres southwest of Williams Lake.