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LNG proposals have 'Alice in Wonderland' quality: opponent

American company has submitted security plan to U.S. energy regulators

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OTTAWA - Armed private security guards on their own boats would escort huge tankers carrying liquefied natural gas through Canada's Head Harbour Passage to U.S. terminals in Maine, say the latest documents filed to U.S. energy regulators.

Downeast LNG, one of two U.S. companies proposing to build an LNG terminal in Maine, has also proposed the use of a private Canadian-based security firm to address any threats from land or sea.

The company is also investigating the use of American Coast Guard officers joining RCMP officers on their vessels, and vice versa, in both Canadian and U.S. waters to provide security. This co-operative "shiprider" program has been tried in the Detroit-Windsor area.

The same approach can be pursued "once Canadian co-operation is established regarding transit issues," says Downeast's Aug. 16 submission to the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

But the assumption that Canada, which opposes LNG tankers in Head Harbour Passage, will eventually co-operate is why Downeast's latest filings have an "Alice in Wonderland" quality, argues Janice Harvey, a Charlotte County environmentalist opposed to the project.

Both using private security or having RCMP and U.S. Coast Guard officers work together are "totally presumptuous and preposterous given what the prime minister has said - that we'll ban the tankers and that there will be no co-operation from Canadian agencies."

Harvey, a leader of Save Passamaquoddy Bay-Canada, predicted Canadians would be outraged to learn the company thought it could "do an end-run around our coast guard" by hiring a private security firm.

Downeast filed several documents within the last week in response to the commission's questions about how the company proposed to deal with Canada's opposition to LNG tankers entering Head Harbour Passage.

Canada formally told the energy commission chairman and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last February that it will not allow the LNG tankers into Canadian waters en route to the U.S. terminals, citing unspecified threats to the environment of Head Harbour Passage.

Since then, Canada has refused to co-operate with either Downeast or Quoddy Bay LNG, the proponent of the other LNG terminal in Maine. Both companies are filing submissions detailing their plans with the energy commission, which has yet to issue permits for their projects.

Late last month, U.S. regulators also asked Downeast to specify how emergencies involving a ship in transit would be responded to when Canadian authorities aren't co-operating in planning.

The company's answer turns to the existing co-operation that occurs between both countries' officials in regards to traffic in the Bay of Fundy. Since 2004, says Downeast, Canada has operated a marine security operations centre in Halifax that involves the RCMP, coast guard, military and RCMP, among others. The

centre also boasts a U.S. Coast Guard liaison officer.

"Although the Canadian government has not agreed to discuss a bilateral agreement specific to (LNG tankers), there is no reason to believe that the Canadian authorities would not respond to an emergency" involving an LNG tanker just as they would if it involved any other ship, says Downeast's submission.

Likewise, any threat to public safety originating on or near shore would involve the RCMP, even without a formal agreement, because of its role in responding to threats to Canada, says Downeast.

"At some point that's true," said Harvey, "but that presumes there is sufficient capacity to respond to an incident in this part of New Brunswick. And I can tell you there isn't."

Harvey said Downeast's latest filings are no substitute for the exhaustive studies and preparations that would be undertaken regarding public notification and evacuation or to beef up medical facilities, if Canada were co-operating.

"Whatever emergency planning you'd need on the U.S. side, you'd also need for the Canadian side," she said, with the added complications that Deer Island is only accessible by one ferry from the New Brunswick mainland, and that Campobello's only year-round access is a two-lane bridge to the U.S.

Downeast also told U.S. regulators it does not expect LNG tankers to interfere with fishing gear, but had developed a plan to compensate fishermen should lobster traps or other gear be affected.

The company plans to route tankers through Canadian waters during the U.S. lobster season and through U.S. waters during the Canadian season, as much as possible. Downeast's filings also say that the tidal power turbines proposed for Western Passage should not interfere with the tankers. That's because the turbines will be submerged below the draft of the vessels and anchored to the sea floor.

Downeast has also determined that the historic Roosevelt cottage and related buildings at Roosevelt Campobello International Park are all roughly 800 metres beyond the outside boundary of any "zone of concern" in the event of an LNG tanker or spill catching fire.