

The Scoop on Federal Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in Canada and the Need for Major Reform

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In the past forty plus years of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on nuclear and many other types of projects, those of us who have worked on them have never found EIAs to be helpful in stopping projects. The EIA process only provides recommendations or advice to government. It is not a decision-making process. Many times in the history of EIAs, the assessment committee recommended that certain projects not proceed because of too many known or unknown risks, yet that recommendation was ignored by government, and the project was approved.

Ever since the inception of the EIA process in the 1970s, the already weak process has been further weakened over and over again by successive governments. In the beginning of EIA, independent panels were selected and public hearings were held. Later, categories of assessment were brought in: panel hearings, comprehensive studies (which were not comprehensive at all), and screenings.

The top level of EIA, public hearings with an independent panel, is now about as rare in Canada as the great auk. Panel hearings provide funding for participant groups to hire experts to prepare information, evidence, and testimony, and to carry out research, travel, etc. At the comprehensive study level of assessment, participant funding may in some cases be provided. At the screening level of assessment, there is no participant funding.

In recent years, very large energy projects including some pipelines, some nuclear waste storage facilities, or other nuclear and energy projects, have only been reviewed at the lowest level of assessment – screening. The screening level means there are no independent panels or public hearings. The screening assessment consists of only paper exchanges between concerned citizens and bureaucrats or proponents of the project. Screening EIAs have no public openness and are not covered by the media. Members of the public often receive mere acknowledgement of their letters but nothing to address their concerns.

Very few projects in Canada are subjected to independent public hearings now, no matter how large or complex. Most are assessed at the screening level only.

Originally the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process was perceived as a good thing, an opportunity for public participation. In actual practice, the EIA process has proved to be a disappointment to those who have worked so hard to present the facts about the possible impacts on the environment by any given project.

The subject of EIAs – with public hearings and real relevance in decision making – is an issue in itself and one that many people and organizations in Canada need to work on.