

Albertans wary of former energy board chair's northern post

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The recent appointment of Neil McCrank to review the regulatory system in the North has raised eyebrows among those in Alberta who have dealt with the former chair of the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board.

Chuck Strahl, federal Indian and northern affairs minister, appointed McCrank as a special ministerial representative on Nov. 7, asking him to find ways to improve a process that critics have said tends to bog down mining and other resource development in the North.

Strahl has given McCrank several months to produce a report with recommended improvements.

Environmentalists have long accused the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, which McCrank chaired from 1998 until his retirement in March, of being pro-industry.

Meanwhile, landowners are still reeling from allegations that the board had hired investigators to spy on a group of owners who opposed a new power line.

'People should be quite wary,' landowners' leader says

Although those allegations surfaced months after McCrank retired from the board, the head of a group of landowners said northerners should still ask tough questions of the new adviser.

"The people should be quite wary of exactly what has gone on and should really demand..., 'Wait a minute, before we take this man's advice, what did go on in Alberta?'" said Joe Anglin, whose group first made the spying allegations.

Janet Keeping, a Calgary-based civil rights lawyer who has studied the relationship between land claims and energy regulation, said Alberta's regulatory system does not allow for much public input.

"Perhaps your system could be more efficient. Perhaps it could be better harmonized, one part of the North to the next," Keeping said.

"But you shouldn't take an overly humble view and think, 'Oh, here comes the guru from Alberta to tell us how to do it.' Uh-uh. It's not like that."

Pierre Alvarez, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said McCrank is just the guy to fix what he said was a mess of a northern regulatory system.

"The thing to remember is that you're not going to bring the Alberta model to the North. It doesn't work. You've got settled claims, you've got a bigger role for the federal government," said Alvarez, who added that McCrank has experience not just in resource regulation, but also in dealing with different levels of government.

"You know, I think this is a person who's got a fine legal mind, and I think [he] will make an important contribution."

In appointing McCrank, Strahl has said he doesn't expect or want him to recommend an Alberta-style regulatory system. At the same time, the minister said the North's system presents much room for improvement.

Regulatory reform an issue among northern ministers

Meanwhile, regulatory reform was a key issue among northern politicians who met in Ottawa for the Northern Development Ministers' Forum on Thursday and Friday.

"It was pointed out that there's going to be \$300 billion of projects over the next 10 years," said Bob McLeod, the N.W.T.'s minister of industry, tourism and investment.

McLeod said he believes one of McCrank's recommendations will call on Ottawa to set up a "major projects office" especially for the North, in order to ensure the regulatory process runs more smoothly.

"The federal government is setting up a major projects office, but they're looking at it separately for the north and the south," he said.

The northern ministers forum brought together ministers and representatives from the three territories and provinces with northern regions.

MLAs from British Columbia, and Newfoundland and Labrador told CBC News they have been cutting down on the number of regulations they have.

"We actually sat down and counted them, and came up with about 383,000 regulations that affected economic opportunities," Bulkley Valley-Stikine MLA Dennis Mackay of British Columbia said.

Mackay said regulations in his province were reduced by 40 per cent as the result of reform.