

Russia approves oil pipeline skirting Lake Baikal

By C.J. Chivers

MOSCOW: A Russian regulatory panel reviewing plans to build an oil pipeline that would pass along the shoreline of Lake Baikal, the world's most voluminous freshwater lake, announced Monday that it had approved the proposal over objections from scientists and environmental groups.

The announcement by the Federal Environmental, Technological and Nuclear Oversight Service will allow Transneft, the state-owned pipeline monopoly, to proceed with plans to build a pipeline to ship Siberian oil eastward to Asian markets.

The project, roughly 4,000 kilometers, or 2,500 miles, long and known as the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline, would pass within 900 meters of Lake Baikal's northern shore.

Lake Baikal is a chasm nearly two kilometers deep that was formed tens of millions of years ago by a crack in the earth's crust.

Nearly 640 kilometers long and 48 wide, it holds more than 20 percent of the world's unfrozen fresh water and is widely regarded as one of Russia's nat-

Environmentalists and scientists rebuffed

ural gems. Much of its plant and animal life exists nowhere else and the United Nations has placed the lake on the World Heritage list.

Scientists have warned that because the region remains seismically active and the lake is still expanding, earthquakes could sever any pipeline, causing its contents to flow into the lake.

They also say that because the Transneft-planned route will require crossing many of the lake's tributaries, the project will cause erosion and send dirt and pollution into the lake's nearly pristine water.

"It looks very bleak for the environment," said Michiel Hotte of the Zoological Society of London, who has campaigned against the pipeline plan.

The decision announced Monday followed months of planning.

Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov signed a resolution late in 2004 detailing the plan, under which Russia, the world's second largest oil exporter, would build the pipeline and diversify its oil sales.

President Vladimir Putin has signaled his approval.

Opponents of the plan said this powerful support doomed a chance for a genuine environmental review.

They said that even though a commission of Russian experts working for the oversight service rejected Transneft's route on environmental grounds, the ruling was not accepted. Instead, a new commission, with additional members, was tasked with reviewing the project again.

Greenpeace Russia, which had also campaigned against the plan, said that the new commission had been under intense pressure and that its decision was all but a foregone conclusion.

Signs of the pressure appeared evident last month, when Transneft's leadership threatened to sue the oversight body and seek financial damages against experts who blocked or delayed the pipe's construction.

Greenpeace Russia said it planned to file a lawsuit against the decision. It was not hopeful of its prospects.

"Suing a state-owned business with close ties to the Kremlin is quite a tricky thing," said Roman Vazhenkov, the campaign coordinator. "But we have to try."

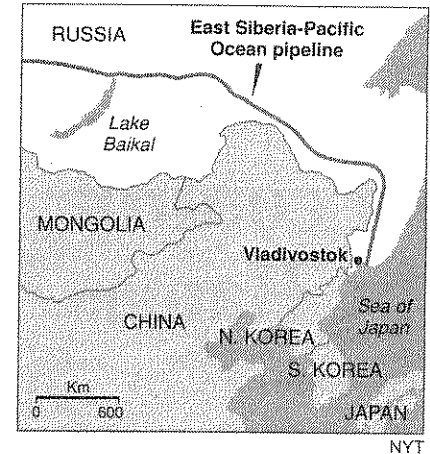
During months of meetings and quarrels, environmentalists had proposed another route for the pipeline from Siberian wells to Asian markets, which would have swung north and east away from the lake and its watershed before joining another section of the route.

The idea never gained favor with Transneft, whose route follows the course of existing rail lines, making development less expensive.

"This is a classic conflict between the cost and the environment," Hotte said, adding that "It is just a matter of convenience."

A spokesman for Transneft declined to comment about the decision.

Company officials have previously minimized the environmental concerns, saying that the pipeline will be constructed to high standards and noting that trains carrying oil and petroleum products already pass by the lake each day.



In an interview last month with the state-owned Rossiskaya Gazeta newspaper, Simon Vainshtok, Transneft's president, also suggested that Greenpeace was a tool being used by unnamed international interests to prevent Russia from opening Asian and Pacific oil markets.

Transneft has said it hopes to have the pipeline completed within three years at a cost of \$11.5 billion.

Environmentalists said that even without delays from lawsuits, that schedule is optimistic.

The New York Times