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Feds step in for assessment of GTA West corridor

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The federal government announced that they will be getting involved and leading the environmental assessment of the proposed GTA West Corridor, a.k.a. Highway 413, earlier in the month.

One of the most polarizing actions by Ontario Premier Doug Ford was the decision to revive and move forward with Highway 413.

The highway, if built, is set to run through Caledon, Vaughan, Brampton, and Halton Hills.

Originally proposed in 2003, but cancelled by the Liberal government in February 2018, the Ford government brought it back in November 2018 and have since received criticism from environmental groups and opposition from municipalities along the route.

Highway 413 would be an approximately 52-kilometre four-to-six lane highway built between the 401 and 407 at the Halton-Peel boundary and the 400 north of Vaughan with two extensions to connect the 410 and 427 with it.

In a statement on Monday, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Jonathan Wilkinson explained the decision for the federal government to step in.

?Canadians expect their governments to make decision based on science and evidence that support environmental protection and economic growth,? said Wilkinson. ?After careful consideration of the available science, evidence, and other relevant information gathered by the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada, as well as the Agency's recommendation to designate the GTA West project, I have decided to designate this project under the federal impact assessment process.

?The Impact Assessment Agency of Canada and other federal departments have identified clear areas of federal concern related to this project. My decision is based on their finding that this project may cause adverse direct or incidental effects on federally-listed species at risk, and the uncertainty that officials have brought to my attention around whether those effects can be mitigated through project design or existing mechanisms.?

With the federal government carrying out the environmental assessment, the Ontario government has to submit a project description. Upon submitting a project description, the Agency makes a determination in a two-to-three-month timeframe from when they receive the documents.

?Now that I have agreed with the advice of the Agency to designate this project, the proponent is required to submit an initial project description that, once accepted, will begin the planning phase of the impact assessment process through which the Agency will be able to decide whether a full federal impact assessment is required,? he said. ?The impact assessment process is grounded in science, evidence, and Indigenous knowledge, and our government firmly believes in the principle of ?one project-one assessment.' Should the Agency decide that areas of federal concern cannot be addressed and that a federal impact assessment is warranted, we will endeavour to work with Ontario to carry out a coordinated and predicable assessment that Canadians can have confidence in.?

The province's main argument pushing for the highway to go forward is the worry over population growth and how that will impact travel with the current infrastructure.

The Ontario government says the Greater Golden Horseshoe's population will nearly double over the next 30 years with it currently at around 7.8 million and projected to be 14.8 million by 2051. They believe by 2031 highways in York and Peel will be overcapacity.

Ontario's Transportation Minister, Caroline Mulroney, said the provincial government has already begun an environmental assessment and put out a statement Monday in response to the federal impact assessment for Highway 413.

?At this point, it is unclear what the scope of a federal impact assessment would be, or whether a full impact assessment would be warranted, especially given the fact that the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada has concluded that concerns surrounding environmental impacts ?are expected to be addressed through the federal and provincial regulatory processes that already exist,? she stated. ?Further, as recently as March 2020, the experts at the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada reviewed the evidence and declined to take further action on the GTA West project.?

Concerns related to endangered species in the area that will be affected by the highway have been a driving factor in the federal government carrying out its own environmental assessment.

?The GTA West project is already subject to a robust provincial Individual Environmental Assessment, which is among the most stringent assessment processes on record. This project is intended to address the congestion and forecasted population growth for the people of Ontario. That said, we also believe in the principle of the ?one project-one assessment' and will work with the federal government to address their newly-founded concerns around the potential adverse effects on the Western Chorus Frog, Red-Head Woodpecker and Rapids Clubtail.?

The key concerns with the highway are the environmental impact it will have with it paving over 2,000 acres of Class 1 and Class 2 farmland, as well as the effects it will have on the Credit River and Humber River, the billions of dollars it will cost taxpayers, and an expert panel saying it will only save commuters approximately 30 to 60 seconds per trip.

In response to the news that the federal government has designated Highway 413 for a federal environmental assessment, Environmental Defence?an agency dedicated to defending clean water, safe climate, and healthy communities who has long opposed the GTA West Corridor?released a statement.

?Environmental Defence applauds the federal government for stepping in to perform a thorough environmental assessment of the proposed Highway 413. This action is necessary due to the Ontario government's dangerous plan to undermine the environmental reviews of this highway and race to its construction,? the statement read.

?If built, Highway 413 will destroy critical farmland, portions of the Greenbelt, wetlands, forests, and endangered species. It would add millions of tonnes of carbon pollution and endanger the health of nearby communities with increased air pollution. The decision to build this highway cannot proceed without thoroughly considering and addressing these impacts, which a federal environmental assessment can provide.?

Environmental Defence has been a leading activist group against the highway and over the last few weeks had been holding webinars with members of the communities that the highway would impact to provide information, answer questions, and empower local leaders to help make a difference.

?Minister Wilkinson listened to the concerns of local citizens along the proposed path of Highway 413, and the unanimous voice of local governments who supported this request for a federal environmental assessment,? said Sarah Buchanan, Ontario Climate Program Manager at Environmental Defence. ?Impacted people and governments don't want to see the province spend billions to destroy critical farmland, portions of the Greenbelt, wetlands, forests, and endangered species, when experts have told us it will only save an average of 30-60 seconds per trip.?

Ecojustice is a non-profit environmental law charity that provides funding to lawyers to use litigation to defend and protect the environment and they've been supporting environmental groups?like Environmental Defence?throughout the process of protesting the 413.

?The federal environmental assessment will ensure a robust process for identifying and mitigating, where possible, any environmental impacts from Highway 413, and will ensure that climate change is adequately considered,? said Ecojustice lawyer Laura Bowman. ?We are confident that this added scrutiny will ultimately reveal that this highway is not in the public interest.?