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Joint Committee on Natural Gas Pipelines

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Legislative Delegation Advances Gas Dialogue Torgerson Invites Canadians, Alaskans to Join Working Group

(ANCHORAGE) – Sen. John Torgerson (R-Soldotna) has invited top government officials from northwest Canadian provinces and territories to join the Alaska Legislature in an international working group aimed at building consensus on critical issues surrounding delivery of Arctic natural gas to southern markets.

Torgerson, chair of the Joint Committee on Natural Gas Pipelines, issued the invitation while leading a delegation of nine senators and representatives on a four-day trip, ending Friday, to the Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories and the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia.

“This would be an important forum for all five governments to exchange information and ideas on gas pipeline proposals and to cooperate on issues of mutual concern,” Torgerson said. “While our interests diverge on some points, we still have much in common in terms of supplying our people with energy for the future, and securing the economic benefits of constructing such pipelines.”

Premier Pat Duncan of the Yukon Territory embraced the working group proposal, and representatives of the other governments promised to consider membership. Meanwhile, the Yukon and NWT governments plan to send representatives to the Committee’s Sept. 19 meeting in Anchorage.

The working group proposal was a highlight of the delegation’s visits to Whitehorse, YT, Yellowknife, N.W.T., Edmonton, Albt., and Vancouver, B.C. to meet with officials responsible for pipelines, energy, economic development, mining, Native affairs, and international trade.

Torgerson said he was encouraged by the friendly reception the Alaskans received, and by the opportunity to meet face-to-face with Canadian leaders to hear first-hand each government’s view of the political, legal and economic aspects of gas development.

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Alaska and Canada are working to encourage construction of pipelines to bring their Arctic gas deposits to market. Three major oil and gas producers are studying the relative merits of the “highway route” south along the Alaska Highway through the Yukon, and the so-called “over-the-top” route east along the Arctic coast before turning south through the NWT’s Mackenzie River delta. The Legislature passed a bill last session blocking the “over-the-top” route, and U.S. Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) has had similar language inserted in the House-passed version of the national energy bill.

“It was recognized that there was a great need for increased discussions and interactions by all parties,” Torgerson said. “We explained the reasons for Alaska’s position against the over-the-top route to the Mackenzie River, and engaged in a frank discussion of corresponding needs and concerns from the other areas.”

Given the high stakes and strong feelings on the issue, the international working group would also be a valuable way for Alaskans and Canadians to avoid the misunderstandings that can occur when cross-border communication is filtered through the press, delegates said.

“I got the chance to explain how important whales are to the Arctic Slope Inupiat, and how adamant they are against any offshore route that could disturb their whaling activities,” said Sen. Donny Olson (D-Nome), an Alaska Native whose district includes the North Slope Borough where whaling is an important cultural and subsistence activity.

Two Interior representatives – Rep. Hugh “Bud” Fate (R-Fairbanks) and Rep. John Davies (D-Fairbanks) - both emphasized the importance that Alaskans in Interior communities attach to the opportunity to secure a reliable, long-term source of natural gas not just for their personal use, but also for commercial and economic development.

Other committee members on the delegation included: Rep. Joe Green (R-Anchorage); Rep. Scott Ogan (R-Palmer); Rep. Mike Chenault (R-Nikiski); Rep. Reggie Joule (D-Kotzebue); and Sen. Johnny Ellis (D-Anchorage).

The delegation’s trip builds on a foundation laid by state legislators on a similar trip to Western Canada last September, and reflects the Legislature’s continuing efforts to work with Canada on issues of mutual concern, including economic development, workforce development, housing, transportation and rural sanitation.

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