

History of Hydrocarbon Exploration in the Northwest Territories

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Exploration for petroleum resources precedes the arrival of the first Europeans. Aboriginal people made use of gummy petroleum from oil seeps along the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River) for purposes such as pitching the seams of their canoes.

Before the turn of the last century, geologists observed the oil seeps and large structures that spurred drilling of the first oil wells near Norman Wells in the early 1920's. Initial development was slow but accelerated rapidly during the Second World War with the CANOL project.

Another wave of interest in the north took place in the late fifties when oil companies greatly widened their search. Regional geological mapping led to discoveries in the Southern Territories, Colville Hills and the High Arctic. Geophysical surveys outlined prospects in the Mackenzie Delta and Beaufort Sea.

Extensive drilling in the Mackenzie Delta/Beaufort Sea followed the "oil shock" of the early seventies. A pipeline along the Mackenzie to carry the large quantities of newly discovered gas was considered until the Berger inquiry in 1977 recommended that aboriginal land claims be settled before development.

Recent land claims, along with tightening energy supplies, have helped to renew interest in the Mackenzie Delta. Huge gas discoveries on the Liard Plateau have caught the attention of major players and gas is already being piped to the south from this region.