



Uranium mining in Saskatchewan

by Miles Goldstick

The three operating uranium mills in northern Saskatchewan, Canada (Key Lake, Cluff Lake and Rabbit Lake) together produce more uranium than any other region in the world. Several new mines have been proposed. Most of these are within the Wollaston Lake drainage basin. Native people in the region have spoken out against uranium mining since it started in the late 1970's. In this article Miles Goldstick gives a short update of the debate of uranium mining in Saskatchewan.

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The uranium mining boom in northern Saskatchewan, Canada continues, despite the general decline of the nuclear industry worldwide. The licensing procedure for twelve new mines and four new mills is currently underway. The three operating uranium mills in northern Saskatchewan (Key Lake, Cluff Lake and Rabbit Lake) together produce more uranium than any other region in the world. The "World Nuclear Industry Handbook 1991" lists total 1989 uranium production at the three mills as 7 745 t and total capacity as 10 700 t per year.

The majority of local Indigenous people in the area, numbering about 25 000, are against mining, but have no decision making power over the land they have inhabited for hundreds of years. Although many northerners continue to live by hunting, trapping and fishing, unemployment remains extremely high. The mines provide very few jobs for native people, and there are few other economic opportunities available.

Native people from the north, particularly in the Wollaston Lake region of Saskatchewan, have spoken out against uranium mining since it started in the late 1970's. In 1985, northern Native people, together with a small group of southern supporters, blocked the road into the Rabbit Lake mill for four days. One of the peoples' requests at that time was an inquiry to examine the effects of all the mines together. Their request was denied. After a major spill of radioactive mine water into Wollaston Lake in 1989, the Hatchet Lake Band called for an inquiry to look at the entire industry and its safety. Again, they were denied.

Most of the new mines being proposed are within the Wollaston Lake drainage basin. Three of the mines are underneath Wollaston Lake. The ore grade of these deposits is the highest known to occur anywhere in the world. Some of these mines may not meet new radiation exposure guidelines proposed by Canada's nuclear regulatory agency, the Atomic Energy Control Board. Adequate radiological pro-

tection in high-grade underground mines may be too expensive. The technology required to mine these deposits safely has not been proven. The industry admits it is unclear whether the new operations can proceed within the proposed new radiation exposure limits.

Two separate review panels have been set up by the federal and provincial governments to look at the proposed new mines and mills. Each review panel has been given terms of reference, a general time frame, and a budget. Their mandate is to "review the environmental, health, safety and socio-economic impacts." There is already great concern about the validity of the review process since construction at the new mine sites continues despite the work being done by the panel. The hearing process is long and complicated and many people are worried that northern concerns will not be heard or addressed.

One of the great difficulties in Saskatchewan is the isolation of northern communities from the more populated areas in the south. Southerners know very little about the north and because of huge distances between the two regions, few opportunities exist to develop a clear understanding about the issues for northern people. However, increasing sympathy for Native rights all across Canada and growing opposition to the whole nuclear fuel chain is bringing people together to stop expansion of this industry. In the coming months, the information exchange will continue and it is hoped that there will be a solid alliance in place by the time the environmental review panel reaches the public hearing stage.

The impacts of mining are not always black and white, but there are three main aspects:

1. Uranium mining in Saskatchewan is a colonial activity. It has been forced on the people of the north. The Indigenous people whose ancestors have always lived in the mining areas do not have decision making power over industrial activity in their ancestral home. Many Natives feel that mining is a contravention of the Treaties signed in good faith by their ancestors. These trea-

Three operating uranium mills in northern Saskatchewan, Canada

ties declared that their lifestyle would not be threatened.

2. Uranium cannot be mined without producing huge quantities of liquid and solid waste at the mine and mill sites. These wastes contaminate a certain amount of land with heavy metals, radionuclides, and process chemicals. There is no debate about whether contamination exists, but rather, how big an area it covers.

3. All of the raw material, yellowcake, ultimately becomes either spent nuclear reactor fuel, one of the deadliest materials on Earth, or is used to make nuclear weapons.

Government reviews update

The Rabbit Lake Uranium Mine Environmental Assessment Panel (run by the federal government only) announced on 20 November 1992 that the environmental impact assessment (EIS) submitted by Cameco Corporation for three proposed uranium mines at Rabbit Lake, Saskatchewan (Collins Bay A- and D-zones and Eagle Point) was not adequate and Cameco has been required to provide more information "in a number of critical areas". Once the additional information has been submitted there will be an at least 30 day public review period before a decision is taken on whether to proceed to the public hearings. According to the Panel Secretariat, Cameco expects to complete its report of additional information in late February, and thus the public hearings would be in late April 1993 at the earliest.

Also on 20 November 1992 the Panel released two documents: the 400 page "Compilation of Submissions" on Cameco's EIS and the 20 page "Request for Additional Information" on the EIS. The latter document lists 29 deficiencies and makes specific information requests for each. The deficiencies cover a wide range of environmental and socio-economic aspects of the proposed mines. The compilation includes all written submissions received by the Panel on the EIS. There are a total of 18 submissions: five from federal government agencies, three from pro-mining associations, seven from

anti-mining individuals and organisations, and three from Panel-appointed experts.

The report by the people of Wollaston Lake is particularly critical of Cameco's plans and style. The Wollaston submission reads, "Wollaston residents know, without benefit of an elaborate environmental assessment and review process, that any further developments will result in some further alienation from a land base." Cameco's evidence of public consultation is referred to as "a transparent manipulation of public opinion."

The Uranium Development Panel (run by both the federal and province of Saskatchewan governments) submitted its final report on 15 January 1993 for the McArthur River underground exploration program, one of the five proposed mines it is examining. The public hearings for this part of the project were completed in December 1992. The public hearings for the production phase of the McArthur River project are not expected until mid-1994. For the Midwest Joint Venture, McClean Lake project, and Cluff Lake extension, public hearings are scheduled for between March and May 1993; and the final reports are expected in the early fall of 1993. For

the Midwest Joint Venture, the Panel's 41 page request for additional information lists 65 deficiencies and related information requests. The Panel's request for additional information on the McClean Lake project is 37 pages in length and lists 59 deficiencies and information requests. ■

More information

Members of both environmental review panels for proposed uranium mines in Saskatchewan have stated that submissions from outside of Canada are welcome. Contact the Panel Secretariat for documents (sent out free of charge): Panel Secretariat, Uranium Mine Development Review Office, Room 420, 1955 Smith Street, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. S4P 2N6. Tel. 1-306-780-8251 (collect calls accepted!). Fax: 1-306-780-8250. For more information on uranium mining in Saskatchewan, also contact: Wollaston Lake Environment Committee, Ed Benoane, General Delivery, Wollaston Lake, Saskatchewan, CANADA S0L 3C0. Tel./fax: 306-633-2107. Inter-Church Uranium Committee, Box 7724, Saskatoon, Sask., CANADA S7K 4R4. Tel. 306-934-3030. Fax 306-652-8377.

