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Press Release

Saskatchewan Environmental Society

Tuesday, September 20, 2016

For immediate release

Can Gunnar Clean-Up Move Forward? SES Still Has Questions

On Thursday, September 22, the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) will hold a hearing in Ottawa to consider Saskatchewan Research Council (SRC)'s request to lift the remaining "hold point" on the remediation project at the abandoned Gunnar uranium mine site. Gunnar, on the north shore of Lake Athabasca, was the site of an open-pit and underground mine and mill that produced uranium for the Government of Canada to supply to the United States atomic weapons program in the late 1950s and early 60s. The site was abandoned without decommissioning in 1963. For the past 50 years contaminants, including uranium and radium, from widely distributed mine tailings, waste rock and the flooded mine pit have been drifting into Lake Athabasca.

As planner and manager of the current remediation project, the Saskatchewan Research Council has spent the past several years doing background studies, demolishing hazardous buildings and designing a complex remediation plan, that has gained tentative approval from the CNSC. However, with that approval, a "hold point" was included to allow public review of detailed technical plans before the actual work of remediation begins. The hearings on Thursday will examine the detailed plan for reducing the flow of contaminants into the environment and decide whether to give SRC the go-ahead to proceed. It is acknowledged that it is not possible to restore the land to its previous pristine condition, but that a significant improvement is anticipated.

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society (SES) is anxious to see the remediation work get under way and generally supports the proposed approach. However, in a written submission, SES raises some issues for consideration by CNSC at the hearing. These include concerns about the lack of a federal commitment to help fund long-term monitoring and maintenance of the site after the current remediation project is completed and responsibility for the site is transferred to the Government of Saskatchewan. The current remediation project is designed for only a 100-year lifetime. Significant maintenance may be expected to be required in the 100- to 200-year time-frame, and uranium mining contaminants at the site could continue to pose a potential hazard for tens of thousands of years into the future.



The estimates of the rate of erosion of cover material to be used in the remediation are also questioned by SES. We are concerned that the proposed cover over the waste rock and tailings may be unable to sustain extreme weather events predicted in the future. This could lead to unplanned releases of contaminants. SES is also asking for more information about the fate and form of the contaminants that have already entered Lake Athabasca.

Finally, SES is asking the CNSC to urge the federal government to assume its fair share of the costs of the current remediation work, estimated to total over \$200 million. At present the federal government is prepared to assume responsibility for only \$12 million dollars of the total budget with the balance remaining as a liability on the Province of Saskatchewan's books. This is unacceptable given that the mining of uranium at the site was done at the request of the Government of Canada, and the lack of decommissioning at the site was the responsibility of the Government of Canada, the sole regulator at the time. Saskatchewan taxpayers are being unfairly burdened.

SES is requesting CNSC to ask SRC and the Government of Canada to respond to the concerns raised in its submission.

Saskatchewan Environmental Society

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society (SES) is a non-profit, registered charity whose mandate is to work towards a world in which all needs are met in sustainable ways. SES has been active in Saskatchewan since 1970. We work on issues such as sustainable energy and climate solutions, water protection, resource conservation and management, biodiversity preservation, reduction of toxic substances, and sustainability planning.

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