



MCCLEAN LAKE MINE & MILL RE-LICENSING PROPOSAL

JUNE 2017

By Ann Coxworth, SES Board Member and Researcher

SES recently intervened in a Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) process considering a proposal for re-licensing of the McClean Lake uranium mine and mill site in Saskatchewan's Athabasca region. No mining is currently taking place at the site, but the mill is very active, processing not only ore from the local mines but also the very rich ore from Cigar Lake. AREVA, the major owner and operator of the project, is seeking a 12-year renewal of its licence, which, if granted, will enable the company to continue milling and to apply for approvals for potential new mining developments at the site.

SES Policy Coordinator, Hayley Carlson and board member Ann Coxworth, with help from SES member Dominique Richard (a geologist) prepared our intervention, which we presented to the CNSC Public Hearing held in La Ronge on June 7th. The concerns we raised included the release of excessive levels of selenium into local waterways, the contradictory and incomplete information provided about impacts on rare and endangered species, the risk associated with raising the level of tailings in the tailings management facility, and gaps in the preliminary decommissioning plan.

The selenium problem results from the unexpectedly high level of this contaminant in the Cigar Lake ore that is transported by road to McClean Lake. The mill was not originally designed to handle this level of selenium, so the liquid effluent released from the mill is problematic. AREVA is working on developing a plan to remedy this situation, but meanwhile is asking to be allowed to continue milling and releasing selenium.

The tailings management facility is located in a mined-out pit. Solid mill wastes, containing very long-lived radioactive and chemically toxic materials that must be kept confined indefinitely, are released under water. With the introduction of the Cigar Lake wastes, the tailings facility is close to running out of space. The plan is to build up a lined berm around the rim of the pit to allow the level of tailings to be built up higher. As the surrounding ground is sandstone, a porous rock, SES suggests that this plan increases the risk of contaminants leaking into groundwater.

The Commission acknowledged our concern that endangered species data are incomplete and also recognised the inconsistencies between different information sources.

Our discussion about the decommissioning plan centered on the lack of identified funding to support on-going maintenance and monitoring of the contaminated site into a very long-term future. Our suggestion that current political entities and regulatory bodies cannot be guaranteed to be in place hundreds of years in the future brought an interesting comment from a senior CNSC person, who asserted that they do not deal in hypotheticals and that the CNSC and the Government of Saskatchewan will be here forever. Because we do not share this official's confidence in the permanence of current institutions, SES takes seriously the need to avoid situations in which we rely upon an attitude of "If something goes wrong a hundred years from now, we'll fix it".



We also drew the Commissioners' attention to the difficulty lay people experience in determining what should be regarded as acceptable levels of contamination, given the many different standards, objectives and targets that are used in the industry and regulatory reports. We suggested that present methods of consultation with local residents are often unsuccessful in building trust. Our own experience, and that of some interveners from local communities, emphasise the importance of establishing early, personal relationships between the proponent and concerned groups, so that concerns can be discussed in an unpressured atmosphere of mutual respect.

Representatives of the Buffalo River and Birch Narrows Denesuline First Nations whose reserves, located southeast of La Loche, are a considerable distance from the McClean Lake site, made a strong presentation. Because their people, from time immemorial, have used extensive areas of northern Saskatchewan for traditional gatherings and for hunting and fishing, and because they are part of Treaty 10, they are very dissatisfied with the lack of adequate consultation. It seems that because these small First Nations had not expressed an interest in previous regulatory processes concerning the McClean site, neither CNSC nor AREVA felt an obligation to engage them in consultation. These Nations are therefore asking for a delay in the re-licensing, as well as funding from AREVA to conduct their own study of the potential impacts of the continued and changing operations at McClean Lake on their people.

An initial submission from Ya'thi Néné – an organisation representing the Black Lake, Fond du Lac and Hatchet Lake First Nations – raised somewhat similar concerns about consultation, and attached a series of conditions to their tentative approval of the request for re-licensing. Interestingly, they later submitted a retraction of these conditions and offered unconditional support for the project. This change was apparently the result of productive meetings and discussions that took place with AREVA following the initial submission, during which most of the concerns that Ya'thi Néné had raised were addressed to their satisfaction.

SES's participation in the review was made possible by funding support from the CNSC's Participant Funding Program. We also acknowledge the help of AREVA staff in answering our questions and providing supplementary information.