



Inuk artist on hunger strike to push for clearing of Muskrat Falls reservoir



'Without Lake Melville, my family couldn't have survived in this area,' says Billy Gauthier

CBC News · Posted: Oct 14, 2016 12:47 PM NT | Last Updated: October 14, 2016



Inuk artist Billy Gauthier says he'll remain on hunger strike until Nalcor commits to fully clearing the Muskrat Falls reservoir. (Billy Gauthier/Facebook, CBC)

An Inuk artist from Labrador says he's going on a hunger strike until Nalcor commits to fully clearing the Muskrat Falls reservoir.

- **Atlantic Voice: Without Seal There Would Be No Me**

Billy Gauthier ate what he said will be his last meal — salmon from Lake Melville near Rigolet — Thursday night. He recorded a video of himself eating the meal and [posted it on his Facebook page](#) as an act of protest.

"Unfortunately, they took it to this [extreme] point. By them, I mean Nalcor," Gauthier told CBC Radio's Labrador Morning.

"See, this here land is the land that built me. Without this land, without Lake Melville, my family couldn't have survived in this area and many, many, many, many families before that couldn't survive in the area," he said.

"I'm an artist, I'm a stone sculptor, and all of my ideas pretty much are from the land. It's where I get my inspiration from.

"If you take that from me, my ability to go out and do my traditional cultural practices which, in large part is hunting and fishing — you take a big portion of my culture from me."

Flooding the Muskrat Falls reservoir could begin as soon as Saturday.



"If they flood that area, I will not eat," said Gauthier, who wants the reservoir cleared of vegetation before the flooding.



Billy Gauthier's carvings have gained international acclaim. His contemporary sculptures are on display at a prestigious Aboriginal art gallery in Vancouver. (Spirit Wrestler Gallery)

Many, including the Nunatsiavut government, [believe clearing will reduce methylmercury levels.](#)

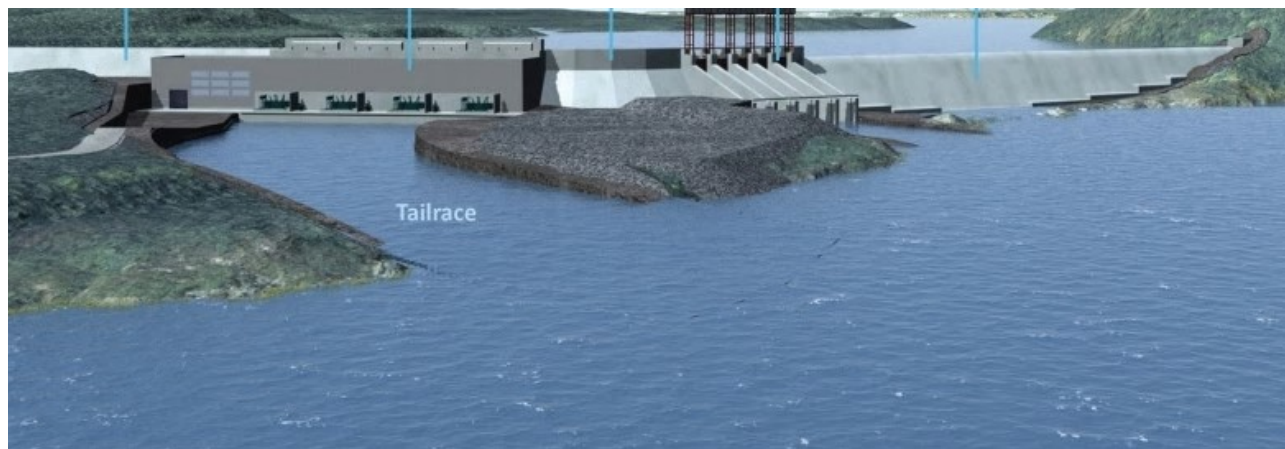
Earlier this week, Environment Minister Perry Trimper said the province is exploring options but a complete clearing isn't possible.

- [N.L. promises to re-examine Muskrat Falls reservoir clearing as Indigenous groups push for change](#)
- [Nalcor downplays study findings into methylmercury fears at Muskrat Falls](#)
- [Muskrat Falls protesters gather at Confederation Building, third protest of day](#)

Gauthier said he regrets having not participated in any local protests until now, aside from showing support on social media.

"This is the best way that I could think of without being violent."





The future Muskrat Falls hydroelectric generating facility. (Courtesy Nalcor Energy)

Hard to tell family

He said committing to the hunger strike was a difficult decision, but one he made quickly. He said telling his family — his daughter, especially — was one of the most difficult things he's ever done.

"It was one of the hardest phone calls I ever had in my life ... I told her exactly what I was doing and how far I was going to go, and I mean that. I'm going all the way," he said.

"I've certainly cried a few times because I realize it's a multi-billion-dollar company and that I truly am willing to go all the way."

“I hope I don't have to go the whole way to do it, but I will.”

- Billy Gauthier

Gauthier said the hunger strike comes with many potential long-term impacts, including blindness and organ failure. But he stressed that he isn't suicidal.

"I love life, I love my daughter, I love my family ... I love my artwork ... all I want is for Nalcor to do exactly what they said they were going to do in the beginning. That's all I want."





Inuk artist Billy Gauthier posted on Facebook: 'Here's a pic of my last meal. Not appetizing to some but delicious to me. Hope it keeps me going for a while.' (Billy Gauthier/Facebook)

Gauthier said the Inuit people have a long history of self-sacrifice for the good of the greater community, and believes it's his "cultural right" to decline food and medical treatment down the road, should it come to that.

"I hope I don't have to go the whole way to do it, but I will."

With files from Labrador Morning

©2018 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.

Visitez Radio-Canada.ca