



Muskrat Falls unrest simmered for years: a look back at methylmercury concerns



A timeline of concerns, criticism and compromise that left no one satisfied

Bailey White · CBC News ·

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Protesters have been camping out near the Muskrat Falls site since Oct. 15. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

Concerns over methylmercury contamination at Muskrat Falls boiled over this month, but tensions around the multi-billion dollar hydroelectric project in Labrador have been percolating for years.

Protesters marched on the Muskrat Falls construction site twice this month — worried that impending flooding would result in dangerous levels of methylmercury in Lake Melville, and would contaminate fish, seal and seabirds downstream.

- [**Provincial government, Labrador leaders make 'significant' Muskrat Falls progress**](#)

The protesters have long called for Nalcor Energy, the provincial Crown company behind the project, to take the unprecedented step of clearing the flood zone of all vegetation and topsoil, though Nalcor would commit only to partial clearing. Here is a look back at the years of simmering unrest:

August 2011

Joint review panel recommends pilot study

Since the project's inception, officials have known methylmercury was an issue. [A joint review](#) panel recommended the best way to deal with the effects would be full vegetation clearing, but Nalcor opted instead for partial clearing of the reservoir. Panel member Cathy Jong [later criticized](#) the Crown corporation.

"I'm concerned about the adequacy of it, I'm concerned about the transparency," she said. "It's not something we can ignore."

November 2012

Nunatsiavut worried about methylmercury

Even before the project got the green light, Nunatsiavut, the Inuit government of northern Labrador, asked the province to help fund research into methylmercury.



Nunatsiavut President Sarah Leo raised the issue of methylmercury back in 2012. (CBC)

Muskrat Falls is outside the Labrador Inuit land claims area, but President [Sarah Leo argued](#) it would affect members downstream.

"We have to recognize, and the province and Nalcor have to recognize, that Inuit health will be affected by this," she said.

January 2013

Nalcor hears concerns from people in central Labrador

Just weeks after the [project was approved](#), Nalcor held a public meeting in Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

Hollis Yetman, vice-president of the Labrador Hunting and Fishing Association [raised the issue](#) of contamination.

"I hear there's going to be lots of studying, but there's no one here going to tell you that you're going to be able to eat the fish without methylmercury poisoning in the future," he said.



Hollis Yetman of the Labrador Hunting and Fishing Association asked about methylmercury at a 2013 public meeting. (CBC)

At the time, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans had yet to sign off on Nalcor's plan to manage fish habitats.

November 2013

Nunatsiavut launches study

The Inuit government [partnered with Harvard](#) University and others to begin research on methylmercury and the unique environment of Lake Melville. The next year, both Nunatsiavut and Nalcor [collected hair samples](#) for further research.

September 2015

Results come in

Initial research from Harvard showed [higher-than-expected](#) levels of methylmercury in Lake Melville, downstream from the Muskrat Falls site, even before flooding. Given that, researchers said the effect of a spike in methylmercury levels during flooding could be more serious than previously thought.



Dr. Elsie Sunderland works for Harvard University's John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. She worked with Nunatsiavut on new research into methylmercury in Lake Melville. (Twitter)

In April 2016, the Harvard team [released more research](#), suggesting methylmercury levels could rise as much as 380 per cent if only partial clearing takes place in the reservoir.

"The bottom line is hundreds of Inuit individuals will be affected by this development," said researcher Elsie Sunderland. "To the point that they exceed regulatory thresholds for exposure."

November 2015

Nunatsiavut begins Make Muskrat Right campaign

Public pressure ramped up as the Nunatsiavut government launched the campaign Make Muskrat Right. The Inuit government asked the province to, among other things, commit to full reservoir clearing.

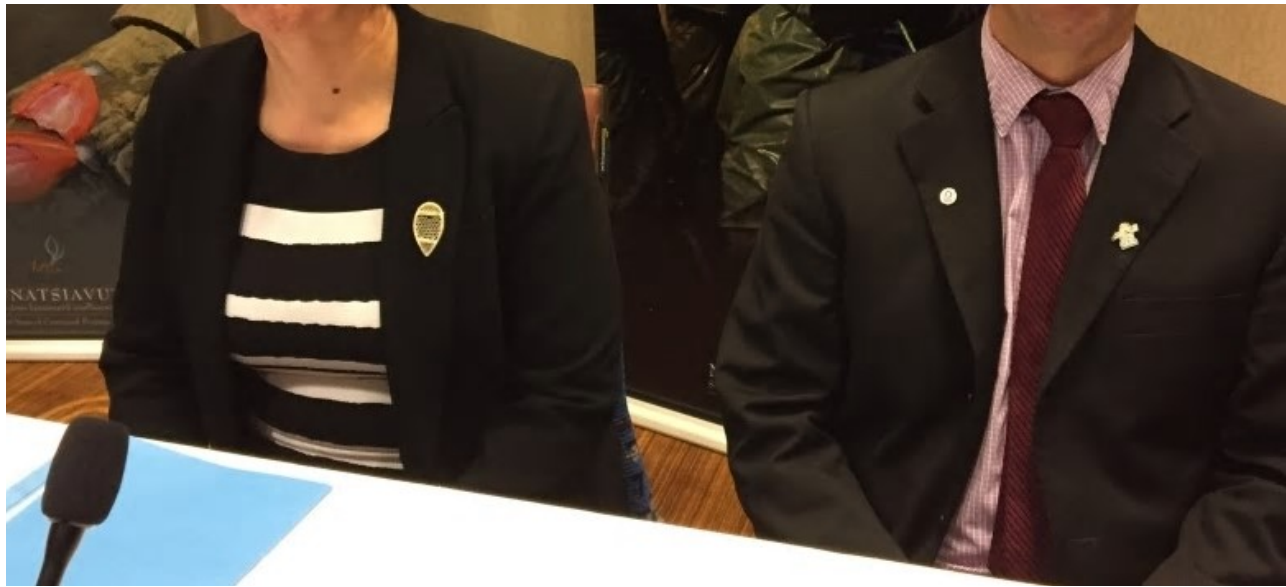
That same month, the Liberals swept Labrador in the 2015 provincial election and Perry Trimper, the member of provincial Parliament for Lake Melville — which includes Muskrat Falls — was [made environment minister](#).

Trimper vowed to keep working with Nunatsiavut on methylmercury. In later months, [he](#) and other [Labrador Liberals](#) faced intense criticism on their mitigation plan — which focused on [monitoring](#) and compensation rather than soil clearing.

March 2016:

Nunatsiavut declines invitation to meeting with Trimper, experts





Nunatsiavut President Sarah Leo, left, and Minister of Lands and Natural Resources Darryl Shiwak are pictured in St. John's in April. (Terry Roberts/CBC)

Tensions reached a boiling point when Nunatsiavut officials [turned down](#) an offer to meet with the environment minister and other experts.

"What the provincial government wishes to do by putting us in a room together is for us to come to some mutually agreed position," said Nunatsiavut Lands and Natural Resources Minister Darryl Shiwak.

"We cannot do that because that's just compromising Inuit health and rights down the stream."

June 2016

Hundreds protest outside Dwight Ball speech





Premier Dwight Ball and Labrador member of Parliament Yvonne Jones meet protesters and Aboriginal leaders in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in June. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

When Premier Dwight Ball travelled to Happy Valley-Goose Bay to deliver a keynote address at a trade show in June 2016, he was greeted by hundreds of protesters and the leaders of three Indigenous groups.

It was the largest demonstration against methylmercury to date. Since then there have been [dozens](#) of other [protests](#) in Labrador, Newfoundland and across the country.

October 13

Billy Gauthier goes on hunger strike

Inuk carver Billy Gauthier snapped a picture of his meal, salmon caught in Lake Melville, and vowed [not to eat again](#) until Nalcor Energy committed to clear the reservoir completely.





Billy Gauthier, left, pictured in Ottawa with fellow hunger strikers Jerry Kohlmeister and Delilah Saunders (Facebook)

Two other Inuit have since taken up their own hunger strikes and the trio [travelled to Ottawa](#) to meet with federal politicians.

Protests ramped up at the Muskrat Falls site, with nine [people arrested](#) for blocking traffic and daily protests near the work camp.

October 19

Nalcor ordered to increase clearing at Muskrat Falls reservoir



Environment Minister Perry Trimper requested a meeting with Nunatsiavut officials in March. (CBC)

As public pressure continued to mount, provincial officials announced further mitigation measures.

Environment Minister Perry Trimper and Natural Resources Minister Siobhan Coady said Nalcor would have to [do more](#) reservoir clearing than originally planned.

"We see an opportunity here to raise the bar, to respond to the concerns and we're willing to do that," said Trimper.

At the protest site, Trimper's comments were met with skepticism, as protesters continued to insist on soil clearing.

October 22

Protesters cut lock, occupy Muskrat Falls site

Hundreds of people gathered to demonstrate at the Muskrat Falls site on Saturday, Oct. 22 when Darren Sheppard cut the lock off a chain-link fence and entered the site with about 50 other protesters.



Busloads of workers were sent home that night, though Nalcor said "critical personnel" were still on site.

Another 20 people entered the site on Sunday, and many remained inside by Tuesday. The Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador ordered the protesters to appear in court, but so far, no one's been arrested.

October 25

Premier meets with Indigenous leaders



Carolyn Stokes

@CStokescbc

Protestors hold minute of silence to send positive energy to the meeting between premier and indigenous leaders inside. [#cbcnl](#)

2:02 PM - Oct 25, 2016

[See Carolyn Stokes's other Tweets](#)

After a marathon, 11-hour meeting at Confederation Building in St. John's, [Indigenous leaders claimed progress had been made](#) in addressing the environmental concerns.

An agreement announced in the early hours of Wednesday will see further independent assessment of the multi-billion dollar hydroelectric project before initial flooding begins.

A special committee will be struck, consisting of members from Nunatsiavut, NunatuKavut and the Innu Nation, that will look at ways to reduce possible methylmercury contamination.

The provincial government also opened the door to potential further clearing of the Muskrat Falls reservoir, and says future decisions will be guided primarily by scientific examination.

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