



Battle over Muskrat Falls: What you need to know



Reservoir flooding plan that raised fears of methylmercury poisoning on hold pending further research

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Protesters leaving the Muskrat Falls site on Wednesday are welcomed outside the gates of the hydroelectric project, located in central Labrador. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

The fight over the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project in Labrador appears to have stopped short of reaching a crisis point — including fears around the fate of three protesters staging a hunger strike — for now.

Although an agreement reached Wednesday between Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Dwight Ball and Inuit officials may have achieved a pause in both the project's operations and the demonstrations against them, the underlying issues remain.

Here's a primer on what the controversy is all about.

What is the Muskrat Falls project?

Nalcor Energy, a Crown corporation of the Newfoundland and Labrador government, is building a multi-billion-dollar hydroelectric dam at Muskrat Falls on the lower Churchill River in Labrador, about 30 kilometres west of Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

Former premiers Danny Williams and Kathy Dunderdale both hailed the 824-megawatt facility as a vital way to transition the province away from an oil-based economy while supplying clean, renewable power across Newfoundland and Labrador.

Nalcor Energy says the power generated by the Muskrat Falls project, which consists of two dams and a powerhouse, will help keep electricity rates stable for consumers in the long term.

Who is protesting the project and why?

The Nunatsiavut government, representing Inuit in Labrador, started a [Make Muskrat Right campaign](#) over concerns that Nalcor wasn't properly managing the risk of contaminating the Churchill River with methylmercury, which, in turn, could flow downstream to Lake Melville, where many Inuit people live.

- **Protesters occupying Muskrat Falls camp exit, despite some skepticism**

Living off the land is integral to Inuit culture and they fear methylmercury — a neurotoxin linked to heart issues, intellectual problems in children and other effects — will poison their food supply, especially fish, which is a dietary staple.

Many non-Indigenous people in local communities, including Happy Valley-Goose Bay, are supporting the Labrador Inuit in their protest.



Protesters emerge from the Muskrat Falls site on Wednesday afternoon. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

How would the project cause methylmercury contamination?

A significant step required to finish the project is the flooding of a 41-square-kilometre reservoir for the dam. Soil and plants naturally contain mercury and flooding — and the subsequent rot — can cause them to

release carbon that fuels a process called methylation, resulting in the formation of methylmercury.

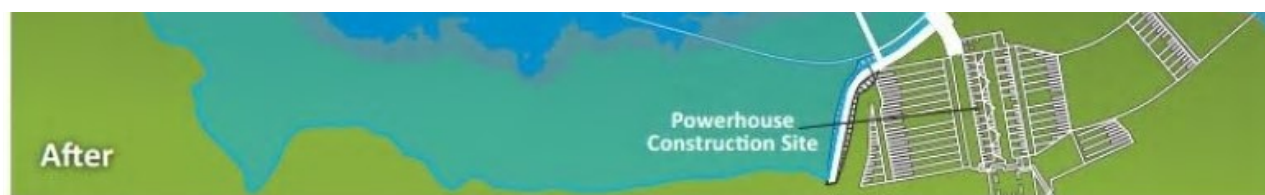
Because of that threat, the Inuit protesters are demanding that Nalcor Energy completely clear out the trees, plants and soil from the reservoir area before they flood it.

Nalcor agreed to remove the trees, but not the soil.

- **Scientists back Inuit in efforts to limit mercury poisoning from Muskrat Falls hydro project**

The Nunatsiavut government later launched a study with Harvard University scientists, which concluded that methylmercury levels could rise as much as 380 per cent in Lake Melville if the reservoir was only partially cleared before flooding. The researchers said that increase could be drastically reduced, to 13 per cent, if the reservoir was fully cleared.





This graphic from an information sheet provided online by Nalcor Energy shows what the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric generating facility's reservoir will look like before and after the water level is increased. Inuit in Labrador are asking the company to completely clear the reservoir of vegetation and soil before flooding it to minimize the risks of methylmercury contamination. (Nalcor Energy)

Nalcor Energy has also commissioned studies and says that although methylmercury levels could increase in the reservoir itself and "immediately downstream" in the Churchill River, it would likely be diluted before reaching Lake Melville.

- [**Nalcor downplays study findings into methylmercury fears at Muskrat Falls**](#)

The company says it will continue to monitor methylmercury levels after the reservoir is flooded and determine whether "consumption advisories for certain foods are needed based on Health Canada's guidance."

Why has the Muskrat Falls controversy escalated?

Although the hydroelectric project has been in the works for years, the reservoir flooding was scheduled to start this fall.

On Oct. 14, renowned Inuk artist Billy Gauthier began a hunger strike. Two other protesters, Jerry Kohlmeister and Delilah Saunders, also began hunger strikes. The three moved their protest from Labrador to Ottawa last Sunday

to draw more attention from the federal government. On Saturday, other demonstrators began occupying the Muskrat Falls work site.

Newfoundland MP Nick Whalen further inflamed the situation over the weekend, when he tweeted that people should "eat less fish" if methylmercury levels were too high.

He has since deleted the tweet and [apologized for his "insensitive comments"](#) in a statement the next day.

Do Inuit in Labrador ultimately want to shut down the project?

Inuit protesters and Nunatsiavut's natural resources minister have publicly said they don't oppose the project itself, but want to see it done "right" — specifically, clearing the reservoir area to minimize the risk of methylmercury contamination.

What's happening now?

Early Wednesday morning, after an 11-hour meeting with Inuit officials, Premier Ball promised the government would seek further independent assessments of the project and create a special committee to look at ways to reduce possible methylmercury contamination. He made no promises about fully clearing vegetation and soil from the Muskrat Falls reservoir.

After the agreement was reached, Nunatsiavut Leader Johannes Lampe called on the protesters to go home and for the hunger strikers to stop. It appears the demonstrators have heeded that call for the time being.

Gauthier, Kohlmeister and Saunders [broke their fasts early Wednesday](#), sharing a meal in their local MP's Ottawa office.



Yvonne Jones

@YvonneJJones

Happy to feed smoked char to these 3 beauties even 1:37am
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With files from Garrett Barry, Bailey White and Sheena Goodyear

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