



'Risky experiment' to remove topsoil from Muskrat Falls reservoir, says Innu nation



Innu want government to reject committee proposal on how to reduce methylmercury

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Peter Penashue, one of two Innu Nation representatives on the oversight committee, says his opinion is based on science. (Bailey White/CBC)

The Innu Nation is urging Newfoundland and Labrador to disregard an expert panel recommendation to remove soil from the Muskrat Falls reservoir, calling it a "risky experiment."

Peter Penashue, one of two Innu Nation representatives on the Independent Expert Advisory Committee looking at health concerns surrounding the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project, told CBC Radio's *Labrador Morning* his opinion is based on science.

"This has never been done in Canada, United States, England, anywhere in the world," Penashue said of the proposal to remove at least 50 centimetres of topsoil from the reservoir.

"This may create more problems than it solves."



The advisory committee was created in 2016 after large-scale protests and hunger strikes in Labrador, which garnered national attention. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

The advisory committee was created in 2016 after large-scale protests and hunger strikes in Labrador, which garnered national attention about potential methylmercury contamination of country food after the Muskrat Falls reservoir is inundated.

Methylmercury is released from organic material like trees and soil after flooding, and accumulates in the food chain.

Research commissioned by the Nunatsiavut government suggested methylmercury levels in traditional foods such as fish and seal could rise to unsafe levels.

- [**Protesters arrested at Muskrat Falls site released**](#)
- [**Tears, relief for hunger strikers as Muskrat Falls agreement ends fast**](#)

Demonstrators demanded the reservoir be cleared of organic matter to lessen the impact.

After months of consideration, the oversight committee recommended partial soil removal and wetland capping. Of four voting members, Innu Nation was the only one to vote against partial soil removal.

Disagreement on committee about soil removal

The expert committee is comprised of six scientists and three Indigenous knowledge experts. The oversight committee made its recommendations based on information compiled by the expert committee.

Penashue pointed out that four scientists disagreed with soil removal, while two scientists and three Indigenous knowledge experts supported it.

"We undertook this process to come up with a solution, a recommendation, that was science-based," Penashue said.

- [Contested Muskrat Falls methylmercury recommendation could cost \\$742M](#)
- [Muskrat Falls unrest simmered for years: a look back at methylmercury concerns](#)

"The scientists are telling us, 'do not remove the soil and the vegetation because we have no idea what we're doing.'"

Penashue said he is concerned about methylmercury levels rising after the reservoir is flooded, but he doesn't believe soil removal is the best solution.

"We've all agreed on establishing a process for monitoring and making sure that we evaluate the effects downstream," he said.

Penashue suggests ulterior motives for decision

While other voting members opted for soil clearing, Penashue suggested their decisions were not based on scientific evidence, but rather on political convenience.

He suggested that both NunatuKavut Community Council and Nunatsiavut Government had something to gain by recommending soil clearing.

When it comes to NunatuKavut, Penashue believes recommending clearing strengthens the group's case for a ratified land claim.

This morning we'll find out why the Innu Nation doesn't want soil cleared from the Muskrat Falls reservoir (00:59). Then, there's a new moose antler competition in Labrador (12:11). After that, we take you the vigil for the Humboldt Broncos in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (21:02). We'll find out

what's coming up at the Lawrence O'Brien Arts Centre this month (29:35). Also, Happy Valley-Goose Bay's Winter Carnival is this weekend, and we'll tell you what's happening (38:46). 46:51

As for Nunatsiavut, Penashue insists the Inuit government is pursuing an impacts-and-benefits agreement to offset the effects of Muskrat Falls.

"There's a self-interest that's happening," Penashue said, "and they're trying to model the science to favour their political interests."

Neither Nunatsiavut or NunatuKavut were immediately available to respond to Penashue's comments.

'It's Innu land'

The advisory committee submitted its recommendations to the province earlier this week. Environment minister Eddie Joyce told reporters Wednesday he hadn't decided whether to accept them.



Eddie Joyce says the government is reviewing the report from the Independent Expert Advisory Committee on Muskrat Falls. (Sherry Vivian/CBC)

Penashue said Joyce ought to give special consideration to Innu Nation's opinion because the Muskrat Falls project is on Innu territory.

"This land that we're talking about, it's Innu land, there's no question about that," he said.

"The negotiations and discussions have to reflect that."

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