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Nunatsiavut and Nalcor at odds over mercury

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The Nunatsiavut Government and Nalcor Energy continue to be at odds on the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project and whether or not people eating fish and seals downstream risk harm in future.



CP file photo

The construction site of the hydroelectric facility at Muskrat Falls is seen on July 14, 2015.

The topic was sparked again earlier this week with the release of a peer-reviewed study, produced by a team out of Harvard University and highlighting methylmercury levels in Lake Melville. The study shows the meeting of salt and fresh water there creates an environment apparently primed to push higher levels of toxic methylmercury into the food chain.

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(<http://www.thetelegram.com/Business/2015-01-14/article-4007915/Mercury-concerns-covered-in-assessment%3A-Nalcor/1>)

Methylmercury can bioaccumulate and eating fish contaminated with mercury is a main means of human exposure.

"We had hoped in the beginning that the effects would be very minimal downstream (from Muskrat Falls), but obviously this has proven that it's not and it's going to be a lot higher than anybody anticipated," said Darryl Shiwak, Nunatsiavut's Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, when asked about the study.

But the study did not look at mercury levels up through the food chain. That falls to further work now being completed by the Harvard team, with results expected in six months or so.

Human health next focus

According to Tom Sheldon, the Nunatsiavut Government's director of Environment, the next piece of work will include information more directly tied to human health, incorporating food samples, dietary surveys of local people, hair samples and other inputs.

"They'll be constructing scenarios in terms of flooding and what that will mean," he said.

While more information is on the way, he said a sincere, public conversation around methylmercury and the project should happen now, before the reservoir for Muskrat Falls is flooded in 2017.

Meanwhile Nalcor Energy is also awaiting another study, focusing on local people and human health.

In November 2014, as The Telegram reported, the company issued notice it was seeking 330 people in the Churchill River area for a Muskrat Falls methylmercury monitoring project.

"We have collected hair samples from the population in Upper Lake Melville. We don't have the results back yet, but we expect them very soon," said Lower Churchill project lead and Nalcor Energy vice-president Gilbert Bennett.

"That data will be public and we'll be able to understand then what the baseline conditions

look like in the population,” he said. The study was fully subscribed.

Nalcor Energy has already established pre-construction concentrations for mercury in the Churchill River water, sediments, plankton and fish. And the information means any changes as a result of the project should be clear and attributable.

The Nunatsiavut Government has accused Nalcor Energy of ignoring the Harvard study, of “spending time sweeping this under the rug,” but Bennett said the science is never ignored.

He also said he did not agree that the study speaks to potential long-term effects for people in the area.

“Our underlying objective here is to make sure that there is no risk to human health. The processes that we’re following and the techniques that we’re using are consistent with what we see in other hydro projects,” he said.

In a Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador decision, on Jan. 12, 2015, Justice David Orsborn rejected Nunatsiavut’s attempt to quash a permit allowing for construction at Muskrat Falls to proceed. In the written ruling, he noted concerns around mercury accumulation remained at the heart of the differences between the two parties.

If consumption warnings were ultimately placed on fish species in Lake Melville, they would not be the first for the province. Warnings are updated regularly and currently apply to species at a half-dozen sites, many associated with hydro, from arctic char in the Cat Arm reservoir to trout in Star Lake. Notices are available online through Environment Canada.

In Labrador, advisories currently warn against eating more than one lake trout or northern pike a day from the Smallwood Reservoir of the Upper Churchill hydro project, Lobstick Forebay or the Churchill River.

RELATED LINKS:

Fish consumption advisories (<https://ec.gc.ca/mercure-mercury/default.asp?lang=En&n=DCBE5083-1#NF>)

Muskrat Falls (generation) environmental effects monitoring (<https://muskratfalls.nalcorenergy.com/environment/generation-revised/>)

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