



Nalcor downplays study findings into methylmercury fears at Muskrat Falls

Says reservoir flooding will not heighten risk to people in Lake Melville

Terry Roberts · CBC News ·

Posted: Apr 18, 2016 1:30 PM NT | Last Updated: April 22, 2016



Nunatsiavut Government President Sarah Leo (left) and Darryl Shiwak, Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, were in St. John's Monday to release a scientific study of mercury levels likely at Muskrat Falls. (Terry Roberts/CBC)

Officials at Nalcor Energy are refuting the alarming findings of a scientific study into methylmercury fears at Muskrat Falls, but are pledging to consider the information in its human risk health assessment for the massive project.

"We will take the time to study the findings further," a spokesman for Nalcor stated in an email Monday evening.

In a statement issued Monday afternoon, Gilbert Bennett, vice-president of the Lower Churchill Project, said some of the findings in the study are consistent with Nalcor's findings, but added, "we do not predict that creation of the Muskrat Falls reservoir will heighten risk to people in Lake Melville."

Bennett's statement came hours after the Nunatsiavut Government released a study, saying hundreds of Labrador Inuit will be exposed to dangerous levels of toxic methylmercury if the Muskrat Falls reservoir is not fully cleared of before it is flooded.

- [**No thanks! Nunatsiavut rebuffs request to talk about mercury in Lake Melville**](#)

Inuit leaders said Monday they are prepared to consider "all options," including a legal challenge, to force Nalcor into action and clear all the trees, brush and other organic material from the reservoir site.

"We are really hoping the regulators look at this and say 'we need to act now.' Frankly, we are running out of time," Darryl Shiwak, Nunatsiavut's Lands and Natural Resources Minister, said during a news conference in St. John's.

Nalcor touts nationally recognized experts

Bennett said Nalcor has been closely monitoring methylmercury as it relates to Muskrat Falls for many years, and understands that people are concerned.

He said the issue "has our full commitment," and Nalcor will "continue to monitor and measure mercury levels in the environment as long as necessary, including in fish, seals and people. We will continue to collaborate with regulators and work with stakeholders on this important topic."

He added that environmental studies for the project "have been undertaken by nationally-recognized technical experts."

Bennett's statement did not address a request by the Inuit to have the reservoir site cleared.



Gilbert Bennett is Nalcor Energy's vice-president for the Lower Churchill project. (CBC)

Levels could spike by 380 per cent, study finds

The Lake Melville Scientific Report is a study by experts in Canada and the United States on how methylmercury will affect Inuit who rely on Lake Melville for food.

The study found there will be a "sharp increase" in methylmercury production in the Muskrat Falls reservoir immediately after it is flooded, and those levels will remain high for decades.

Downstream in Lake Melville, the report finds, methylmercury levels are expected to increase by as much as 380 per cent if only partial clearing takes place in the reservoir, but would be reduced to 13 per cent if it is fully cleared.

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

The Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project will require the flooding of a large reservoir, and Nalcor has only committed to partial clearing of the wood, brush, vegetation and topsoil.

As this organic material breaks down, it will create higher levels of methylmercury, which is then ingested by marine life.

Methylmercury is proven to be toxic to a human's central nervous system.

Sarah Leo says concerns are 'valid'

Nalcor has said that much of the increased methylmercury will be diluted in Goose Bay, before ever reaching Lake Melville and the abundant marine life that is routinely harvested by Inuit.

If levels do increase, the corporation has said it will issue warnings about consuming fish or seal.

The Inuit have said that's not good enough, and that the findings of this study reaffirm their concerns.

"Our concerns are valid," said Nunatsiavut Government president Sarah Leo.

"Until full clearing is carried out, flooding must not be allowed. It's as simple as that."

Under the current plan, Leo said there is a potential for over 200 Inuit to be pushed above Health Canada guidelines for methylmercury exposure, while that number doubles when American guidelines are applied.

The community of Rigolet will be especially affected because so many of its residents lead a more traditional lifestyle, which includes eating wild food such as fish and seal.

"Our culture and the health of our people is being directly threatened by this development," Leo stated.

In addition to a demand that the reservoir be cleared, the study contains three other recommendations, including a requirement for Nalcor to negotiate an impact management agreement with the Inuit before any flooding, and that the Inuit have a greater say on environmental monitoring.

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

Visitez Radio-Canada.ca