

Premier says decision on Muskrat Falls clearing will be made soon

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Minister responsible for Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs and Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador
Dwight Ball. - File Photo

HAPPY VALLEY-GOOSE BAY, N.L.

In April of 2018 the Independent Expert Advisory Committee (IEAC) struck by the province on methylmercury concerns related to the Muskrat Falls project released its report and four recommendations.

The Nunatsiavut Government (NG) and the Nunatukavut Community Council (NCC), two of the groups involved in the IEAC, have been calling on the province to respond to the recommendations and say whether they are going to implement them or not.

Minister responsible for Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs and Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador Dwight Ball spoke with The Labradorian about the recommendations. He said a decision on them will be coming early in the new year.

"This work has been done, there's a report there, we need to let them know what we think the best thing to do here," Ball said.

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Three of the recommendations were agreed upon by all voting parties but one, that Nalcor Energy undertake targeted removal of soil and capping of wetlands in the future reservoir area before impoundment, was not agreed to by the Innu Nation.

The other recommendations from the IEAC were a public information campaign be undertaken; an independent body oversee the design and implementation of a monitoring program for the Lower Churchill Project; and the province, Nalcor Energy, Indigenous groups and the local populations negotiate an Impact Security Fund prior to full flooding.

The final recommendation was that Nalcor Energy undertake targeted removal of soil and capping of wetlands in the future reservoir area before impoundment.

The clearing has been estimated to cost between \$409 million and \$742 million, not including contingency funds, contractor risk premiums and costs associated with additional project delays.

Ball said the recommendation on clearing and capping needs a science and evidence-based approach. The province has been taking water samples, over 1,000 so far he said, and thus far there has been no increase in methylmercury.

"We've been going through the summer with those water samples and if you go back to when the early reports were coming out they were saying that in a matter of weeks you would see increases in methylmercury," he said. "Well, that didn't happen in the real environment here."

Ball said the province is looking at capping wetland and other ways to mitigate the potential for methylmercury contamination, but the evidence doesn't clearly show that clearing the reservoir would have that effect. He said some of the experts, some of the science and research, are saying that soil removal could actually cause increased levels of methylmercury.

"There are discussions ongoing now whether we should put a capping program in place," he said. "Soil removal is extremely expensive, but the whole idea is that we manage the health risk, if any, and so far the samples we've been collecting, there's nothing there to demonstrate those kind of health risks.

"We need to make sure that we use the science and use evidence that we have and make the right decision."

Ball said he understands the frustration of the NG and NCC and that the province needs to respond to the report, which they will do early in 2019.