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Methylmercury deal struck with 2 of 3 Labrador Indigenous groups | CBC News



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Remaining Indigenous group implored Ball to halt plans to flood Muskrat Falls reservoir

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This Nalcor Energy photo of the Muskrat Falls power generating project was taken in May. As of April, the entire Lower Churchill Project was 98 per cent complete. (Nalcor)

The provincial government has struck deals with the Innu Nation and NunatuKavut community council to give them money that was supposed to be used for capping the Muskrat Falls reservoir before flooding.

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In a press release, Premier Dwight Ball said the deal was reached earlier this month. The statement comes one day after the president of a third Indigenous group called on the premier to stop the flooding until the wetlands could be capped and methylmercury concerns could be mitigated.

Johannes Lampe, president of the Nunatsiavut government, says he's afraid his Inuit people will be poisoned.

- [Nunatsiavut president pleads with premier to pump the brakes on Muskrat Falls flooding](#)

That concern is shared by Progressive Conservative MHA Lela Evans, who represents the Torngat district.

"The government is supposed to protect its people, its lands and its wildlife. That is why I ran. That is why I'm standing here speaking to you now," she said during question period at Confederation Building on Tuesday. "My people are going to be poisoned."



Lela Evans, PC MHA for Torngat Mountains, says the Liberal government is choosing to do nothing to protect people from methylmercury poisoning she says will result from flooding the Muskrat Falls reservoir. (Katie

Breen/CBC)

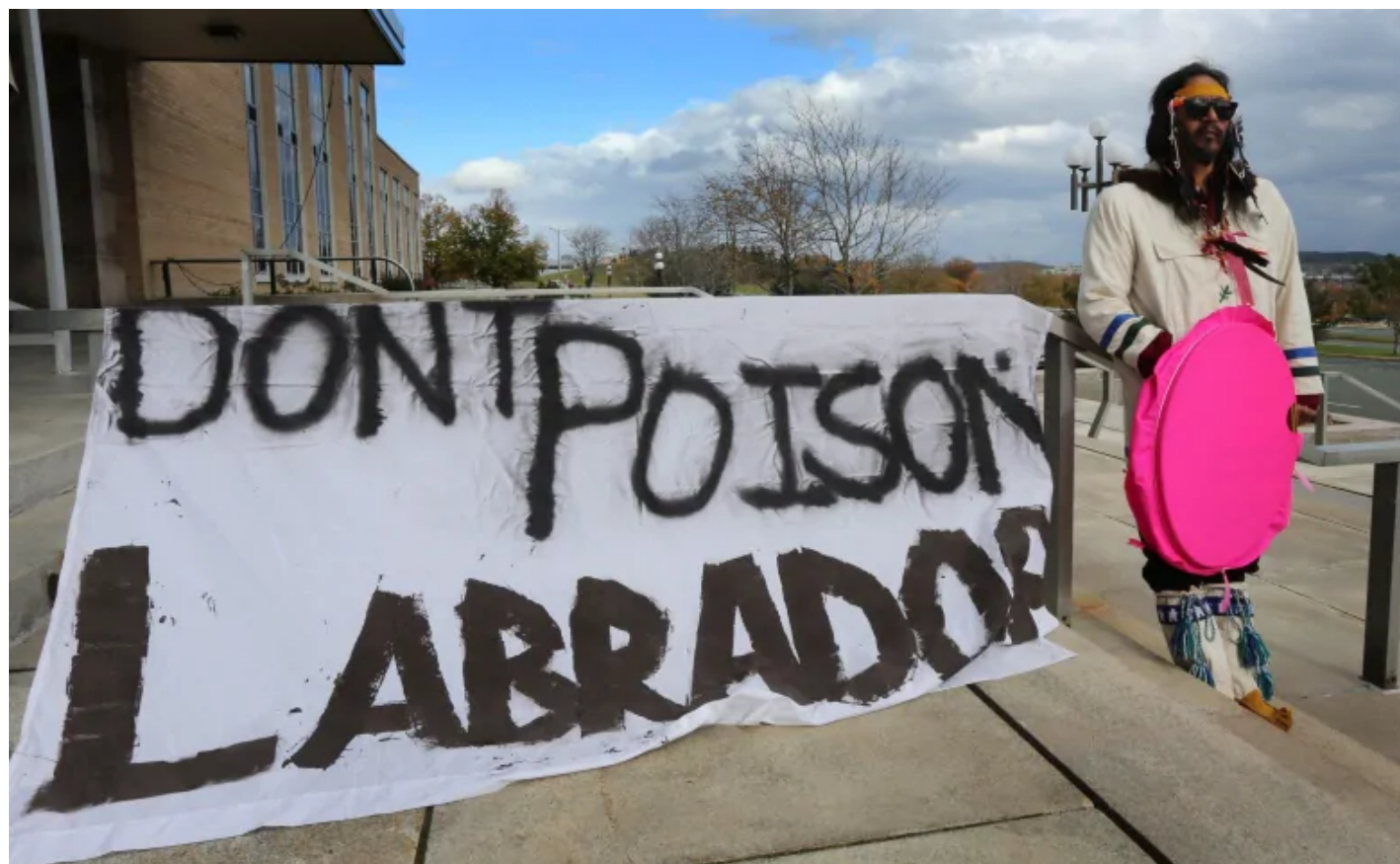
Her fiery remarks drew a loud response from Environment Minister Lisa Dempster.

"There's some extreme messaging out there people will be poisoned," she said. "I say to [Evans], my fellow Labradorian, that is absolutely false."

The Calder study

The concerns stem from a 2016 report by Harvard University, which took samples from the reservoir area. The study showed methylmercury levels could double after the reservoir is flooded, but in a recent interview with the Narwhal, an online newsmagazine that focuses on the environment, Ryan Calder, a PhD student who authored the study, said the concerns were not life or death.

"We didn't find anything to suggest that people are going to drop dead or face acute medical distress as a result of the increases," Calder said.



Labrador artist Stan Nochasak attends a Muskrat Falls demonstration on the steps of the Confederation Building in St. John's on Oct. 25, 2016. (Paul Daly/Canadian Press)

Dempster said the provincial government has been monitoring the reservoir meticulously, taking more than 1,300 samples. She said they haven't found results that back up the Harvard findings.

"We've actually seen some flooding and thought, based on Calder, that we would see an increase in methylmercury, but we did not," Dempster said.

Evans, who has a biology degree and worked as an environmental advisor at Voisey's Bay, countered by saying the effects won't be seen until it accumulates in the food chain.

"Measuring water samples right now is not really effective in forecasting the future," she said. "I say to you that bioaccumulation in the food chain for Inuit, Indigenous people that eat the food, it will cause methylmercury poisoning. In the breast milk, in the children and in the parents."

Wetland capping recommended by all

Nalcor expects flooding to begin Aug. 7.

An independent expert advisory committee comprising of representatives from Indigenous groups that live downstream of the project unanimously recommended wetland capping as a way to mitigate any risks posed by reservoir flooding.

The provincial government originally earmarked \$30 million for the capping, but the window of opportunity to carry out the work became too small and it's now impossible to be done before the planned flooding date.

Meeting the deadline was the responsibility of the Department of Environment, which was headed by Andrew Parsons at the time.

In the House of Assembly on Tuesday, Opposition Leader Ches Crosbie asked Ball if he would "reprimand and dismiss" Parsons from his current position as justice minister. It was met with laughs by the Liberal MHAs and Ball didn't address the question.

- [**Too late to mitigate: Inquiry hears how wetland capping no longer a Muskrat option**](#)

- **PCs accuse government of 'deliberate' inaction on methylmercury at Muskrat**

Speaking with reporters afterwards, he said a letter stating the deadline for capping was missed by the Department of Environment. He didn't lay blame on anyone, and when asked if he would do anything about it, Ball only said he was "frustrated" and "disappointed."

Continued monitoring, attempts to work with Nunatsiavut

According to Ball, the recent meetings with Labrador's Indigenous leaders focused on what to do with the money now that it would not be spent on wetland capping.

"Government agrees with the Indigenous groups on the importance of continued monitoring of methylmercury levels at the Muskrat Falls reservoir, downstream and in Lake Melville," he said in the release.



Premier Dwight Ball says he's reached an agreement with two of Labrador's three Indigenous groups about methylmercury concerns. (Bruce Tilley/CBC)

"Engagement with all three Indigenous groups is ongoing as government remains committed to protecting the health of residents of Labrador."

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Those promises ring hollow for Evans, who stood in the House and asked Ball about his relationship with Indigenous groups.

"Will the premier agree to conduct an independent investigation into this important issue of trust between his government and Indigenous peoples and table that report in this house?"

Ball did not answer her question.

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With files from Bailey White

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