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Nunatsiavut president pleads with premier to pump the brakes on Muskrat Falls flooding



Johannes Lampe cites ongoing methylmercury concerns, 3 weeks before impoundment

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Nunatsiavut President Johannes Lampe says provincial government inaction on methylmercury amounts to a betrayal of Labrador Inuit. (CBC)

Just weeks before the Muskrat Falls reservoir is to be flooded, the president of Nunatsiavut is imploring Premier Dwight Ball to suspend the process, citing concerns over methylmercury contamination of fish, mammals and birds in Lake Melville.

Johannes Lampe's public plea Monday is the latest in a series of attempts by the Labrador Inuit government to limit the risk of traditional food like salmon, seal and goose becoming dangerous to eat.

"Take into consideration the culture, the way of life and the health of the Inuit," he said. "[We want them to] stop the flooding of the Muskrat Falls reservoir and to think seriously about what it is that will happen to Labrador Inuit for years to come."

Lampe is asking the premier to direct Nalcor, the Crown corporation building a hydro dam at Muskrat Falls, to suspend flooding until mitigation measures are taken.

"We are extremely disappointed with how the premier has handled the whole Muskrat Falls fiasco," Lampe wrote in a statement on Monday morning.

"He has repeatedly betrayed our trust by refusing to address our concerns."

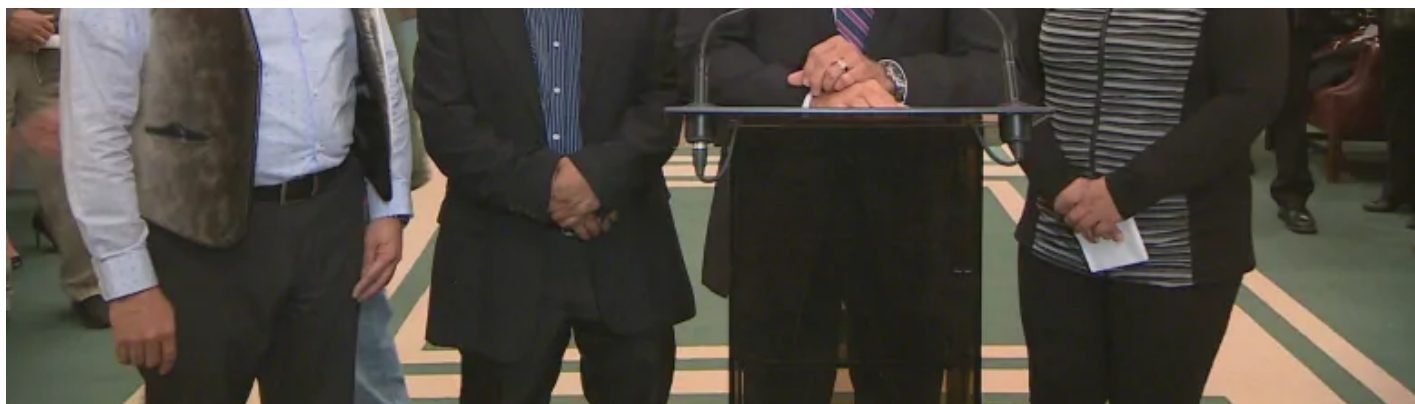
Premier Dwight Ball's office did not respond to repeated interview requests Monday. As for Nalcor, a spokesperson directed questions to the provincial government.

Long battle

Nunatsiavut began sounding the alarm over methylmercury before the Muskrat Falls hydro project got started.

The naturally occurring chemical compound already exists in Lake Melville and in soil and vegetation, like trees.





Premier Dwight Ball, second from right, speaks to reporters following a marathon meeting at Confederation Building in St. John's in 2016. He was joined by, from left, NunatuKavut Community Council head Todd Russell, Lampe, and then Innu Nation grand chief Anastasia Qupee. (CBC)

When the reservoir is flooded, vegetation once on dry land will be submerged. It will then decompose and release methylmercury into the water, and make its through the food chain.

Nunatsiavut commissioned research released in 2016 that suggests the amount of methylmercury released will make certain foods unsafe to eat.

Nalcor's own research suggests methylmercury levels will increase only slightly, causing no additional risk to traditional food consumption.

Hundreds protest

In October 2016, hundreds of protestors held a demonstration for more than a week outside the gates of the Muskrat Falls work site, demanding a plan to mitigate the effect of methylmercury.

Three young Inuit went on a hunger strike, one man cut the lock on a site gate and several people occupied a work camp for days. Dozens of people were arrested.

As a result of the unrest, the premier summoned the leaders of Labrador's three Indigenous groups to Confederation Building in St. John's.





Hundreds of people protested outside the Muskrat Falls site for several days in 2016. (Katie Breen/CBC)

After an 11-hour meeting, all parties agreed to create an independent advisory committee, which would recommend mitigation measures.

In 2018, the committee recommended — among other things — wetland capping to stem the release of methylmercury.

Nalcor set aside \$30 million for the capping, but in June, the inquiry into the Muskrat Falls project heard that the provincial government had in fact missed a deadline to begin capping and that flooding was to go ahead, regardless.

While there's been discussion about using the capping money for other programs related to Labrador Inuit, Lampe said they aren't interested.

"We have known all along Nalcor had budgeted \$30 million for wetland capping and that is what we still want them to do, because that is what it is budgeted for."

Nalcor plans to begin flooding the reservoir Aug. 7.

- [Too late to mitigate: Inquiry hears how wetland capping no longer a Muskrat option](#)
- [Muskrat Falls unrest simmered for years: a look back at methylmercury concerns](#)

Lampe says Nunatsiavut has "explored all options, including legal, to try to ensure mitigation measures are carried out," leaving the Inuit government with little recourse apart from this latest public appeal.

"In the spirit of reconciliation," his statement goes on, "we call on the premier to do the right thing."

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With files from Bailey White and Terry Roberts

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