

“What was said about Uranium in Nunavut.”

PUBLIC FORUM ON URANIUM

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary is intended to give the reader an overall impression of what members of the public said about uranium mining in Nunavut.

One hundred and seven people participated in consultations by speaking out at public forums in Baker Lake, Iqaluit, and Cambridge Bay, and/or by providing comments in the drop boxes provided at the forums or through submissions by e-mail, on the website, or by telephone.

Drawing on those comments, you will read in this report;

- What participants said about uranium mining specifically
- What they said about mining generally
- People's concerns about the consultation and regulatory processes around uranium mining
- What people suggested they need in order to feel confident in the process

This executive summary focuses on the comments made by the public and does not include responses made by panellists at community consultations. While the panellists offered fulsome answers to inquiries, as with any consultation process, there is no guarantee what they heard changed people's minds about uranium. It is fair to assume that by-and-large the public have the same concerns about uranium today as they did before the consultation process began.

WHAT PEOPLE TALKED ABOUT – AN OVERVIEW

The most frequent comments—raised by roughly half of all participants—related to the consultation process and to issues around employment and/or economic development. Environmental concerns were raised by one-third of all participants.

Comments related to the regulation, policy and technology associated with uranium mining, as well as to the end-use of uranium were also frequently raised. Other comments dealt with public safety, sustainability and cultural changes, and the perceived trade-offs and risks associated with uranium mining.¹

QUESTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES REGARDING URANIUM SPECIFICALLY

Many participants voiced opinions and concerns about mining in general. There were, in addition, a number of comments and questions that related specifically to uranium.

During the Iqaluit forum, one member of the public asked for clear information about uranium and its properties. He wanted straightforward information to avoid any surprises

¹ See the full Summary Report, "What was said about Uranium in Nunavut," for a more in-depth reporting of these comments.

in the future, such as he had experienced with DEW line sites near his community. With the DEW line, he noted that his community was never told of the safety issues or the dangers of those sites:

“But after the sites were closed we could not approach the buildings close to them and that was when the DEW lines were closed.” So the question he posed to the panel was, “What is uranium, and its physical look and traits?”

Another person asked how long tailings remain radioactive after a uranium mine closes.

Questions were raised about the risks of radiation associated with uranium:

“I wanted to know why our people are scared, what are the dangers of uranium? We hear it is dangerous. I came to find out why, can anyone tell me? ...I have grandchildren, so that is why I really wanted to understand this...I wanted to know if they are going to be looked after, their health and everything”

Many comments were made that related to the perceived environmental issues associated with uranium mining. Common concerns were about potential impacts to caribou populations and potential contamination of water:

“I am an elder, maybe 72 years old. I am curious about uranium, something that is dangerous, because I do not understand. I am genuinely scared because I do not understand, and I rely on food from our animals. They drink from any water, what if the caribou ate uranium, and I ate a radioactive caribou. What would happen?”

“I don't like the fact that radiation can be spread so easily. When uranium is mined the rock is ground up really fine and only a portion of the uranium is extracted out of the rock. The radioactive dust is able to be carried in the wind, settle on the land and water, and enter the food chain.”

“Even though it is being looked after very well, you never know what is going to happen. ... I am sure the contaminants will flow down the river to where we have our livelihood and where we catch our fish. We do not know what to do, if contaminants were to flow to our sea. ...I am in agreement with mining coming up. Even gold mining, I am in agreement with those. But the uranium mine I am having a really hard time saying yes to it, because the risks are too high.”

In addition, several people noted that the Nunavut environment is unique from other regions. In particular, high winds and lack of trees may lead to dust being carried far from the open pit mine operations. The nature of water flow through areas of permafrost was also raised as a unique consideration:

“I believe mining should only be done where communities are not in too close a proximity to the radioactive particles that will be swished around during a mid-winter

blizzard or during a summer storm. ...The proposed Kiggavik seemingly seems to be a bit too close to Baker Lake and is an important calving ground for the Beverly Caribou. A sacred ground for the caribou. Once mined, the ground shall be deemed as hazardous for eons to come, never to be stepped on again.”

PERSPECTIVES AND QUESTIONS REGARDING MINING IN GENERAL

Many of the concerns that people wanted to talk about related to all types of mining operations, not only uranium mines. These comments are important to note as they are indicator of what is on people’s minds.

Many participants raised concerns over mining impact on caribou. The fairly recent construction of the road between Baker Lake and Meadowbank mine generated debate.:

“I have noticed since the gold mine in Baker Lake built the road the caribou are acting different. Female caribou are known not to cross roads with calves. There are also huge 15 to 20 foot cliffs of snow from plowing the road and caribou can’t cross. Last year’s hunting was showing a much higher number of females with no calves. This Spring there are many more females on the west side of the community because they can’t cross from the huge piles of snow left by plowing.”

“This year especially we had no caribou near the community. Many hunters think, including myself, the all weather road may be the culprit...”

Others, however, suggest that a recent scarcity of caribou in the Baker Lake area is part of a natural cycle:

“There are lots of places the caribou can go to...caribou will always move from one place to another.”

Many people also spoke about the need for the kind of employment and business opportunities that would be created by mining developments, including the proposed uranium projects. Some of these comments related to the growing population and the need for economic growth in order to create adequate new employment opportunities:

“I am really supporting the mine to open, as long as it provides job opportunities, and so I am noticing —especially in the community where I have noticed brighter faces and people are a lot happier, you know. They have been well provided, there are more snowmobiles, and I cannot wait for this to happen. ”

“We are trying to think about our descendants. How are they going to have a job, make money? We are meeting on this important matter, and I want it to continue to develop, and it has been given to us by God.”

“There is getting to be more children, and not very much employment in our land...I also have a brother, a sibling, my youngest, and we lived on the land. He used to go trapping, but he stopped, he could not continue and he committed suicide because there was no job. We cannot try to survive by trapping. ...Our grandchildren will want jobs, and will ask why did grandma not encourage or close this deal...”

“When you have no employment there is really lots of drinking and drugging in the communities and depression and violence, you name it. There are more deaths, like suicide and I would like to avoid that...”

Recognition of the need for livelihood opportunities, mixed with concerns about uranium mining, led to many suggestions that there are alternative ways to create jobs and support economic development. Uranium mining is not the only option available. These comments fall into two main groups. The first is that there is lots of mineral potential in Nunavut and so other mines will create jobs that do not involve working with uranium. The following is a sample of these sorts of comment:

“There is no work, no employment, so I am going for this to go ahead...but...maybe there could be another project that could go ahead that is not so dangerous.”

“...in that area there might be other opportunities, not just uranium. Other things like gold and things for medicine... I want people to have jobs, but I say go for something else than uranium.”

“The risks of uranium last forever. I am not against mining. Mining brings jobs, investment and infrastructure but uranium is not anything we want in Nunavut!”

“I feel Nunavut should ban uranium all together and concentrate on the other mines that are in process. Start with these and work with them to be the best, environmentally, commercially and culturally. Start with the three and work with these—Meadowbank, Baffinland (potential), Meliadine (potential).”

PERSPECTIVES ON CONSULTATION AND REGULATORY PROCESSES

A number of participants made observations about the consultation process itself, questioning whether they could trust the process. Some asked whether the uranium industry could be trusted, as it is “in the business of making money.” Others said they believed most of the information they were getting was coming from people supportive of mining. There were also several concerns about the balance of views on the panels:

“The panel is unevenly stacked. If there were equal representatives from both sides, this would be a more responsible and equitable consultation.”

“It feels like the panel here is looking past us, and looking at our land and what they can get from it. What about us? What are we worth to you people?...”

“We are still illiterate about uranium mining and its risks so what do we do? We have heard so many different stories, so we do not know who to believe, like someone said before, there are pros and cons, so what do we do? We watch the rest of Canada. For the last few years we have heard about Ontario opposing any kind of uranium exploration, same thing with Quebec and Nova Scotia and BC. So we watch them, if they do not want uranium mines in their provinces why do we have to have it in Nunavut? Is it less dangerous in Nunavut? Or are we so illiterate and broke that we will say yes to anything?”

One woman from Baker Lake expressed some frustration about the uncertainty of the message:

“It seems like we are just talking and talking—let us know for real if it is dangerous or not.”

In some cases, participants lacked confidence in the ability of regulators to protect people and the environment. For example, several comments suggested that risks associated with uranium mining may be difficult to address, in spite of the assurances provided by regulators and others involved in the industry:

“It is very easy for us to say that we are going to minimize the risks and that we want to maximize benefits. But what exactly does that mean? ... legislative protection only goes so far... often we have learned too late when the problems arise that legislation and the regulations did not do their job, and did not protect us. ...It is not just what risks are we prepared to bear, but what risks are we prepared to put out there? ...nuclear power is often told to us that it is clean and that it is safe. The fact is that it is true—until it is not.”

“I think uranium mining in Nunavut is risky business. I understand that there are strict safety regulations and procedures when it comes to uranium mining. However, I still believe that the potential risks are far too high, especially in our environment where uranium mining has not been 'tested'. It almost seems like a big science experiment, with hopes that things will turn out well.”

Some participants, on the other hand, expressed confidence in the current processes for reviewing, approving, and eventually regulating uranium mining projects:

“I am glad the GN is looking into this and having a public forum, so they can have precision on uranium mining in Nunavut.”

“We are not going to see mining outweighing the environment and the wildlife. And people need to be healthy. I am glad that when we settled the land claims the NIRB and the Nunavut Water Board were born. There was a mining company that made a

proposal to open a mine. They went to the Nunavut regulator and the regulator sent them back to the drawing board because their environmental assessment proposal had not been right. I am proud of that. They are not going to do decisions blindly.”

“...So allow it [the NIRB process] to do its work. And allow it to make sure that we the people of Baker Lake have a very real say in that NIRB process, wherever it goes. Who knows, maybe at the end the day, NIRB will say no...”

WHAT PEOPLE FEEL THEY NEED

In expressing their concerns about uranium mining specifically or mining in general, participants also suggest things that could be done to increase their confidence in the consultation and regulatory processes;

- Encourage young people to participate more in the consultation process
- Explain how decisions will be made around uranium mining
- Further educate Inuit to the risks/benefits of uranium and other mining operations
- Find better sources for unbiased information

Young people

Several participants expressed a need to get more young people involved in the consultation process:

“My priorities will not necessarily be the same as my children. As long as there are benefits I will support it, but my children might have other thoughts...”

Other participants said their opinions on mining are influenced primarily by the impact it will have on their children and grandchildren;

“In the many years past we were against uranium mining and mines...but nowadays I might have changed my mind. My grandchildren are many and they think different from what I do. Some want to go ahead and I do not try to discourage them. (I)f it was just me and my husband and we had no children I would not be here. I would be home watching TV. But because I have children I do not want them to be without a livelihood.”

How will a decision on uranium mining be reached?

There were a couple of suggestions that the question of uranium mining be put to a vote in Nunavut;

“I think the people of Nunavut should make the decision regarding uranium mining in Nunavut, via a plebiscite. I live in Kivalliq and there is an atmosphere of not wanting to speak out for or against uranium mining because of public backlash. This fear will prevent an honest evaluation of the subject.”

Others suggested that some residents might be hesitant to speak out in public:

“Because Baker Lake will be impacted the most by uranium mining, there should be a plebiscite to determine what the people actually want. Some people are afraid to speak out against uranium mining, for fear of losing jobs, community blame and so on.”

Better education around mining

Some participants expressed the view that people need more information about uranium before they can fully participate in these kinds of consultation processes:

“For many who are struggling with literacy, keeping their children safe and fed, and many other challenges, being able to take the time to become informed and voice opinions about uranium is neither possible nor a priority. It is up to you and other elected officials to make decisions in the best interest of future generations.”

“During this “consultation process” I have not seen any true attempts by the Government of Nunavut to educate Inuit about the risks of uranium mining, or any of the resource extraction projects happening in Nunavut for that matter.”

“There should be a moratorium on Uranium mining until there is enough Inuktitut vocabulary to educate people so they can make informed decisions.”

“I am from Baker Lake and can easily say that the majority in our community knows very little about uranium mining. People need to be well-informed before any decisions are made about uranium mining.”

Unbiased information

As mentioned previously, some members of the public felt they couldn't trust the source of information around uranium mining:

“I would like for my community to know more, to have access to information regarding both the pros and cons of uranium mining—unbiased information, that is presented ...in ways that allow people to see more than one side of the story. It isn't just short-term jobs vs. potential environment damage, people need to understand that there is much more to it than that.”

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

Three different perspectives can be identified out of the range of comments made during the public forum.

One perspective is that uranium mining should not proceed in Nunavut for any reason. The basis for this perspective varies somewhat amongst those who expressed this view, but generally relates to:

- perceptions of the “morality” of mining and using uranium;

- the long-term perceived liability uranium mines will place on future generations;
- the environmental and health risks associated with uranium mining.

A second perspective is that uranium mining would be good for Nunavut's economy and should be supported. Existing regulatory agencies such as NIRB are able to ensure that Projects will be safe and that the environment will be protected.

A third perspective sees that decisions about uranium mining are about trade-offs. Those who hold this perspective perceive that benefits such as jobs for Nunavummiut will be gained, while potential damage to the environment or to people may be experienced. Some of the people who hold this "trade-off" perspective have come to a personal conclusion as to whether or not the "benefits" they expect to arise from uranium mining will outweigh the "costs" they expect will have to be borne either by themselves or by other Nunavummiut now or in the future. Others simply stated what they feel are the trade-offs, without expressing a conclusion as to whether or not the trade-off should be supported or not.

