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A Saskatchewan Dene perspective on uranium

Nunavummiut Makitagunarningit 'misleading,' First Nations leader says

DON DERANGER

Readers of the position statement written by the Nunavummiut Makitagunarningit group that was published in the June 28 edition of Nunatsiaq Online were given a highly, misleading picture of the relationship the uranium mining industry in northern Saskatchewan has with local stakeholders. Year after year, polling shows support for our industry among people in Saskatchewan, including northern stakeholders, tops 80 per cent.

As a First Nations leader from northern Saskatchewan, I know this support is earned, based on how the companies protect the environment and support local communities.

A little over a year ago I accepted Cameco's invitation to join their board. I believe it is important that people of a traditional aboriginal background engage with other business leaders and let them know the importance that our people place on the land, water and air.

What I learned after joining Cameco's board was that my fellow directors were well aware of that point of view and embrace it.

In the past year, I have met many people who work in the Saskatchewan uranium industry whose jobs are entirely devoted to ensure that the industry's mining and milling operations operate safely and cleanly.

Compared to many other resource industries, the footprint of uranium mining is small. For example, the world's largest producing uranium mine is McArthur River in the Athabasca basin. This mine produces enough uranium each year to fuel 34 nuclear power plants or, put another way, enough energy to meet seven per cent of U.S. electricity demand. Yet, the developed surface area at McArthur River occupies less than two square kilometres.

The environmental effects of all our uranium operations on land, water and air are well below the limits set by Canada's federal and provincial regulators. Independent monitoring shows it is safe to consume the fish in nearby watersheds.

While the Nunavummiut Makitagunarningit appears to be impressed by the negative view of uranium mining held by the City of Ottawa's chief medical officer, this is not the view held by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission.

The CNSC is the chief federal regulator, responsible for ensuring the health and safety of those working in the uranium industry. It has many experts on staff and has undertaken scientific studies and reviewed the literature from other studies.

The regulator has said:

"Studies demonstrate that present-day uranium workers, and the public living near a uranium mine or mill, are as healthy as the general Canadian population."

The CNSC's full statement on uranium mining safety can be viewed at:
<http://www.cnscccsn.gc.ca/eng/>

It isn't just the CNSC watching what we do. Local aboriginal stakeholders monitor our operations through an environmental quality council.

Externally, the well-being of the stakeholders who live closest to our uranium mines is important to utilities around the world that buy their uranium from Cameco and use it to generate clean electricity. These utilities have conducted sustainable development audits of our operations and have also looked at our commitment to social responsibility.

The industry in Saskatchewan does many things to make sure that northern people benefit most from the development of Saskatchewan's uranium. To name a few:

- We have a flexible work schedule that allows our northern employees to pursue traditional hunting and fishing activities if they choose.
- We fly workers into our sites from the widely dispersed communities of the region.
- We employ aboriginal elders as cultural counselors at our operations.
- We support schools across the region and provide scholarships and other initiatives to encourage northern people to attend universities.
- We work with northerners on business development to ensure a high percentage of our goods and services are purchased from northern-owned businesses.
- We support trades and apprenticeship training to help northern people advance to higher paying, higher skilled jobs.
- We fund charitable initiatives that improve quality of life across the region.

Northern Saskatchewan is my home, so it is not my place to tell the residents of Nunavut what approaches they should take. However, they should know the facts about the uranium mining industry.

From my experience, uranium mining has evolved significantly over the years and is a safe, highly regulated industry in Canada. I see uranium mining as a positive force, bringing tremendous benefit and opportunity with minimal environmental impact.

Donald Deranger is a board member of Cameco Corporation. He was born and raised within a Dene-speaking First Nations community in northern Saskatchewan and is the Athabasca vice-chief of the Prince Albert Grand Council which represents most of the people living in the communities closest to Saskatchewan's uranium mines. He is also a member of several Canadian organizations dedicated to preserving the northern environment.