
NOTHING TO SEE HERE...

failures of self-monitoring and reporting for mercury at De Beers Victor diamond mine, Canada

Back in 2007, mining giant De Beers itself predicted that operations at its Victor Mine in Ontario's Far North, to open the following year, might increase levels of toxic methylmercury in the downstream river by up to 1100 per cent.

We obtained that disturbing information only through a Freedom of Information request, submitted by our colleagues at Ecojustice. It wasn't discussed in the federal environmental assessment, during public consultation for the mine's environmental permits, nor anywhere else on the public record. Yet it appears to have been accepted by Ontario's Environment Ministry (the Ministry) at the time of the permitting.

More importantly, this prediction might also be playing-out: samples taken by De Beers from 2010 to 2013 showed average methylmercury levels far higher downstream from the mine. As with the predictions, this information too was not on the public record - even though the company is actually specifically required to include it in its annual reports. Instead, a concerned source sent it to us. De Beers did not report it to the Ministry.

These failures to report important downstream results to the Ministry as required, have shocked us.

These revelations, and others from an 18-month investigation by CPAWS Wildlands League, tell us two important things about the Victor Mine, as De Beers contemplates further expansion.

First, the mine activities are triggering adverse impacts on the environment, by stimulating mercury conversion to methylmercury. Methylmercury is a more dangerous threat to aquatic life as it biomagnifies up the food chain into the top predator fish. Fish in the river downstream of the mine have had a history of consumption warnings for people eating them even before the mine was built.

Second, the program for monitoring the mine's mercury impacts - described as the best ever by officials in the Ministry who wrote them into the permit - is not working. The company's required reporting and analysis is riddled with many gaps, and the Ministry has missed or ignored them.

This also means that all related permit extensions and expansion plans are being considered by the Ministry without the benefit of a complete picture of impacts from the mine.

These failures to report to the Ministry are described inside this special report. To us, they show that entrusting this self-monitoring to the company is inadequate to protect the environment in which the mine operates.

They also raise questions about the government's commitment to safeguard the pristine northern half of the province and the people who live there. If it can't get monitoring right with this one project, how can it take care of an entire pristine watershed with dozens of new mines on the horizon?

To restore confidence, the province needs to now take emergency action:

(1) Engage an independent third party to take over the monitoring program to completion.

(2) Require all monitoring data to be immediately provided to the Ministry and transparently available to the interested public.

(3) Review the adequacy of the monitoring program in place currently

(4) Remove barriers to public access to required reporting