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News Release

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KEY LAKE MILL AND TAILINGS PIT NEED TOUGHER REGULATION

Waste disposal practices at the Key Lake uranium mill have received a “below requirements” grade from the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, a warning sign that all is not well, says the Saskatchewan Environmental Society.

The facility that holds and manages radioactive waste at Key Lake has suffered major operational setbacks, with 2.3 million cubic meters of sand that makes up part of the sides of the waste disposal pit collapsing into it.

“The pit contains radioactive tailings that must be kept away from ground water for thousands of years into the future. The fact that the slopes of the waste disposal facility are already collapsing does not bode well for the future” said Ann Coxworth and Peter Prebble of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society (SES).

“The vast bulk of the radioactive and toxic waste associated with uranium extraction are in the tailings facility” said the SES representatives. The radioactive half life of the Key Lake tailings is 76,000 years. The tailings contain large amounts of radium and other cancer causing materials that must be kept away from ground water. They also contain toxic elements like arsenic.

The Key Lake waste management facility is holding radioactive tailings not only from the Key Lake mine, but from the McArthur River mine site as well. The tailings facility is supposed to be the way that Cameco protects future generations from the toxic and radioactive waste materials that it has brought to the surface. The fact that the massive Key Lake waste facility is not operating in the way Cameco projected it would raises important questions about whether the facility’s design will be successful in keeping ground water away from the radioactive wastes over the next several thousand years.

Simply put, if Cameco cannot accurately forecast waste facility operations over a 25 year time period, what is going to happen to the radioactive wastes when the company leaves the site? How accurate are Cameco’s forecasts that northern groundwater will be safe?

Prebble and Coxworth pointed out that this is not the first time that a northern Saskatchewan uranium mill tailings facility has had major operational problems. “Areva (previously Cogema) had serious problems at Cluff Lake when the concrete vaults that radioactive waste was placed in began leaking. The uranium mining company had forecast the vaults would safely hold the radioactive tailing for hundreds of years into the future. In practice, they didn’t last 20 years.”

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society is urging the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission to tighten its regulation of the massive Key Lake radioactive waste management facilities by taking the following actions:

- a) Limiting Cameco’s license renewal to every 2 years instead of every 5 years, until the waste management problems are brought under control;
- b) Increasing the required post-decommissioning bond to \$200 million to ensure that future generations have money on hand to clean up the radioactive waste facility if serious problems arise;
- c) Requiring Cameco to post signs warning future generations that they should not go near or dig up the toxic and radioactive waste site at Key Lake. The company will need to find a way of creating signs that will be a ‘lasting warning’ that will be effective thousands of years into the future, despite changes in language and culture;
- d) Requiring Cameco to monitor the waste management site and take responsibility for the wastes for at least the next 100 years, before turning the site over to the provincial government.

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society will present its recommendations to the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission tomorrow at public hearings in Saskatoon.

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