

Raising the mining stakes

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GUEST COLUMN



LAST MONTH, the provincial government began a long-awaited overhaul of a piece of legislation that is over 100 years old: Ontario's Mining Act. Through a series of public consultations, including a session on Aug. 18 in Thunder Bay, the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines (MNDM) sought public input on how the Mining Act can be revisited to ensure it meets the expectations of our values today.

The government is undertaking this task just as business is booming in the mining industry. According to the MNDM's discussion paper, *Modernizing Ontario's Mining Act — Finding A Balance* (August 2008), exploration spending in Ontario rose from \$120 million in 2002 to \$500 million in 2007, and is expected to be more than \$625 million in 2008.

With such a lucrative industry, it is important that Ontario ensure that environmental costs are not hidden. Future generations should not pay for this generation's current windfall.

Environmental impacts associated with mining can begin at the early exploration phase right through to the closure of the mine. During exploration, contamination of soils and waterways can occur from leaks of fuels and drilling fluids, impacting fish bearing lakes and rivers. And noise from low-flying aircraft and drilling can disrupt migratory patterns and movement of wildlife.

While some impacts from mining exploration and operation may be localized or short-lived, there are significant risks associated with mine tailings and waste water storage. Ammonia, calcium chloride, chlorine, hydrochloric acid, sodium cyanide and sulphuric acid are just some of the chemicals used in mining processes. Runoff of contaminants into waterways can result in bioaccumulation in the food chain, and ultimately end up in human beings. Pollution from activities associated with mineral extraction

and processing activities are estimated to cost billions to human health in Canada.

Mining operations work to reduce the severity of the environmental damage by monitoring tailings ponds, installing effluent treatment plants, monitoring surface and ground water and aquatic life, and conducting environmental audits. However, Ontario is home to more than 5,700 known abandoned mine sites. According to MNDM, approximately 4,000 sites have the potential to be hazardous to public health and safety and to the environment.

UNFORTUNATELY, far too often the public bear the cost of these cleanups. Once completed in 2009, it is estimated that over \$50 million of public funds will have been spent to clean up the environmental damage of the Kam Kotia mine near Timmins that closed in the 1970s. The ministry estimates that the proper rehabilitation of Ontario's full suite of abandoned mines will cost \$500 million. Even sites which have been effectively rehabilitated will likely require monitoring and maintenance forever. Is this how the people of Ontario want tax dollars to be spent, or can some of these costs be prevented?

The current review of the outdated Mining Act is an opportunity to ensure an environmentally and socially responsible legacy in Ontario, and show national and international leadership in the ways mineral resources are developed. Northern communities and First Nations should be adequately consulted both

in the development of the updated act and in subsequent mineral extraction.

Communities must also have the right to say no to mine development where the environmental and human health risks are considered too great — that means mandatory environmental screenings and assessments at key stages of mineral extraction to ensure the public understands the true costs and benefits of proposed projects.

While mine closure plans became mandatory in Ontario in the early 1990s, reclamation bonds typically only cover only a small fraction of the costs of environmental cleanups. Approximately 80 per cent of reclamation funds are "self-assured" based on the current financial position of the company, yet, history has shown that even projects that were considered sound investments can fail due to unexpected market changes or poor management.

Public funds and the environment should be protected by collecting realizable financial security deposits from mining companies to cover the entire reclamation cost predicted for a mine project.

The deadline for general public comments on how to update the Mining Act expired on Oct. 15. But the deadline for submissions by Aboriginal peoples has been extended to Nov. 12 and can be submitted directly to the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, at miningact@ontario.ca.

Increased oversight is needed. It will protect our people, our environment and our investments.

Julia Wdowiak grew up in Thunder Bay and graduated with her Honours Degree in Biology from Lakehead University. She spent a semester in Svalbard, Norway at the United Nations International School specializing in High Arctic Studies, Climate Change and Glaciology. She is a member of Environment North and recently finished an Environmental Outreach Internship with Ontario Nature.