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Soil Study group addresses residents concerns

BY BILL BRADLEY

An open house, organized by The Sudbury Soils Study open house, held last Tuesday at Science North, gave citizens an opportunity to air concerns about their exposure to toxic metals from past mining practices.



Chris Wren of the SARA Group is responsible for the \$5 million study to assess the human and ecological risks posed by toxic metals like arsenic, nickel and copper.

Local mining companies volunteered to fund the work, one of the biggest environmental risk assessments underway in Canada.

Madeline Beaupre of Onwatin Lake Road in Hanmer wanted to know about the safety of her groundwater.

"What about my groundwater?" Beaupre asked Wren. "We're concerned about the effect of acidified rain water filtering through slag heaps and then entering our groundwater."

Wren explained the study he is coordinating is not just about collecting data from soil samples, but is also looking at air, plants, wildlife and water.

Air is being monitored at 10 sites over 24-hour periods. Data is now being processed from vegetable samples from 68 residential, 10 commercial plots and 17 wild spots. Everything from lettuce and potatoes to blueberries and mushrooms are being studied for their accumulation of metals. Sports fish tissue samples were collected from winter creel studies from four local lakes.

A preliminary wildlife study is underway at 17 sites where grasses and grasshoppers were analyzed. Next, water samples from area lakes and groundwater will be collected.

"We'll be looking at groundwater this winter and we will visit residents to take samples directly from their water sources," said Wren. He expects the SARA team to collect data from 60-100 residential wells, groundwater, and municipal drinking water sources, including Ramsey Lake.

Wren assured the public that if preliminary results from all this data show the possibility of any serious human health effects, residents will be immediately contacted by the Ministry of the Environment staff.

"We may do direct studies of people in the Sudbury area including personal consultations with people concerned about any related health problems," said Wren.

Dr. Lesbia Smith is SARA's medical consultant. She is a doctor specializing in medical and health testing. Smith has extensive experience in field testing of humans in contaminated areas.

"The best method though is not to test individuals but assess whole communities at once," she said.

This is especially true from areas like Falconbridge, already showing high levels of exposure from past Ministry of Environment data.

Smith applauded SARA's summer Vegetable Garden Survey as an excellent way to measure intake of toxins from the soil through the plants and into residents. Once the data indicates high levels of potential exposure in specific areas, then testing of humans would be an excellent next step.

Wren discounted community concerns that because the Sudbury Soil Study is being funded by the mining companies both the process of data collection and the final results are suspect.

"The mining companies do not control the process or the outcome," he said. "There are at least six checks and balances in place, from the appointment of Science North biologist Franco Mariotti as Independent Process Observer, to final peer review by the international scientific community."

Brennain Loyd of Northwatch, Northeastern Ontario's environmental watchdog, was pleased that the public was showing more interest in the Sudbury Soil Study.

"I see a higher attendance by the public at the Public Advisory Committee meetings," she said. "We too have some concerns as to how independent the study really is but it does not mean the process is not fixable."

She plans to highlight the issues raised at her Northwatch winter meeting in Sudbury this winter. For more information about the Sudbury Soil Study call 1-866-315-0228 or visit www.sudburysoilsstudy.com.

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