

Scientific adviser promises committee independence

He says his work for Inco Ltd. won't affect how he carries out his role with the Sudbury Soils Study

By Carol Mulligan
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The scientific adviser hired by the working group of the Sudbury Soils Study says he doesn't believe he's in a conflict of interest — despite having worked for one of the key partners in the study.

Dr. Ron Brecher, of GlobalTox International Consultants Inc. of Guelph, appeared before the Sudbury Soils Study's public advisory committee Tuesday and offered his "personal commitment" for his work on the study.

"My reputation, ethics and moral fibre ... go far beyond this project," Brecher said of the Sudbury Soils Study.

The hiring of Brecher as scientific adviser has sparked criticism from those who point out he has worked for Inco Ltd. on previous occasions, most notably in preparing for an environmental hearing in Port Colborne, where Inco also has operations.

Inco is one of six partners in the Sudbury Soils Study, a \$5-million, three-year project to determine the level of contamination of toxic metals in local soils and their possible risk on human and environmental health.

Other partners

The other partners are Falconbridge Ltd., the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, the City of Greater Sudbury, the Sudbury and District Health Unit and Health Canada (First Nations and Inuit Health Branch).

Brecher told the PAC, and the small audience attending the meeting at Cambrian College's Koski Centre, that he was doing his best to avoid situations where he might place himself in a conflict of interest.

Among his other duties, Brecher provides answers to scientific questions from both the public advisory committee and the technical committee, the group empowered to make decisions regarding the soils study.

But his main role is to help the technical committee implement the vision of the study.

Eric Gillespie, a Toronto lawyer who has represented a number of Port Colborne residents in contaminated soil lawsuits against Inco, told the committee his concern is that Brecher is in a perceived conflict of interest position for having worked for Inco.

Gillespie and Brecher broke into an argument over Brecher's role in an environmental hearing held in Port Colborne.

Gillespie charged that Brecher was prepared to testify on Inco's behalf that nickel concentrations of 8,000 ppm were acceptable in soil.

Brecher countered that since he was not required to speak at the hearing because it was settled, Gillespie had no way of knowing how he would have testified.

Brecher said his role was more to act as an adviser on risk assessment pertaining to nickel for Inco.

Homer Seguin, an Inco retiree and longtime union activist, said he was impressed with Brecher's credentials and his commitment to the project.

But he said he was still concerned that the work Brecher did for Inco in Port Colborne might somehow be applied to Sudbury.

Gillespie told the public advisory committee that since Sudbury soil samples have shown concentrations in the range of 3,000 ppm of nickel, Brecher's advice to Inco about 8,000 ppm being acceptable might impact upon the Sudbury Soils Study.

Depending on the findings of the study, Inco and Falconbridge could be ordered to pay to remediate contaminated soils in Sudbury.

The Ministry of the Environment recommended Inco and Falconbridge pay for a soils study after their own testing revealed higher than normal levels of chemicals of concern such as arsenic and nickel in Sudbury soils.

Brian McMahon is the ministry's project manager for the Sudbury Soils Study.

He's convinced the public should have confidence in the process because of all the checks and balances built into it.

Even though Inco and Falconbridge are funding the study, they are but two of six partners in it.

The public's interests are being well represented by the federal, provincial and municipal government bodies participating in the study, he said.

"I believe we have the right bodies at the table to deal" with this, said McMahon after the meeting.

Once the study's findings are finalized, they will be presented to an international panel for review.

Independent process observer Franco Mariotti is also monitoring the process as it develops and comments regularly on the job both the technical and public advisory committees are doing.

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