

Soils study takes next step

Group now looking at the cumulative effect of toxic metals in soil, air, water, vegetation and wildlife in Sudbury

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

Results of individual samples tested for toxic metals in soil, air, water, vegetation and wildlife in Sudbury haven't raised any alarms, but the cumulative effect of those chemicals of concern has yet to be examined.

Chris Wren, director of the group conducting the Sudbury Soils Study, said his team is busy analysing the potential risk to both human and environmental health of thousands of samples collected for the five-year, \$5-million study.

Wren was one of three speakers at a community information session held Wednesday at Science North's Inco Cavern to update the public on the progress of the study.

The results of the study that will be presented to the public in 2006 will likely cover thousands of pages. The final report will show the health risks, if any, that more than a century of mining operations pose for both Sudburians and their environment.

If need be, it will also contain recommendations for how mining companies Inco and Falconbridge should remediate soils contaminated with toxic chemicals.

"The results to date have been very positive," said Wren.

What the Sudbury Area Risk Assessment (SARA) Group is now analysing is the combined effect that inhaling toxic metals, consuming them in food and liquids, having skin contact with them and contacting them in soil can have on human health.

Risk assessment "is what it's all about," said Wren of the study that was recommended by the Ministry of the Environment after its samples showed elevated levels of metals of concern in Sudbury soils.

Wren said the process has been "cumbersome and slow," but said it contains many checks and balances to ensure that the final report will be "a quality product that everyone will have faith in."

Brian McMahon of the Ministry of the Environment told an audience comprised largely of partners in the study that the final report will be independently reviewed by Toxicology Excellence for Risk Assessment, a Cincinnati-based company.

An audience member questioned the fact the TERA group would only have three or four months to review findings that took years to collect, but McMahon said the group said it would have time to independently review the SARA Group's findings.

One of the reasons the study's technical committee selected TERA as its independent reviewer is because it agreed to hold some of its sessions in Sudbury. Many of them will be open to the public, said McMahon. TERA representatives

make their first visit here in April.

The final report the SARA Group will prepare will be based on more than 10,000 soil samples tested for copper, nickel, lead, arsenic, cobalt and selenium, as well as thousands of air, water, vegetation, dust and wildlife samples.

Wren said the Sudbury Soils Study is breaking new ground by examining the potential risks of metal contamination on children, as well as by going into people's homes to test dust samples.

The SARA Group will present its findings to the soil study's technical committee, the decision-making body for the study, this summer. But the results won't be made public until they are subjected to both independent and peer scientific review.

Wren stressed that if the SARA Group has concerns about health or environmental risks, study partners will make those concerns known before the report is made public.

The Sudbury Soil Study partners are Inco, Falconbridge, the Ministry of the Environment, the City of Greater Sudbury, the Sudbury and District Health Unit and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch.

One of the checks and balances for the soils study, which Wren spoke of, is the public advisory committee. Its chairman, John Hogenbirk, told the audience there is still time to get involved.

For more information or to get involved, phone 1-866-315-0228 or visit the website www.sudburysoilsstudy.com.