

Soils study group wants firm answers

The Sudbury Soils Study is a three-year, \$5-million investigation into the levels of chemicals of concern in Sudbury soils and their impact upon human and environmental health

By Carol Mulligan
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Members of the public advisory committee (PAC) for the Sudbury Soils Study will be looking for firm answers to serious environmental questions when the study presents its findings next year.

Aino Laamanen wants to know: "Is it safe to grow vegetables and eat them?" and "What's happened to the swallows in Sudbury?"

Last night, Laamanen and other members of the Sudbury Soils Study's PAC asked a representative of the group conducting the study if those kinds of answers will be forthcoming when the study is completed.

The Sudbury Soils Study, a three-year, \$5-million investigation into the levels of chemicals of concern in Sudbury soils and their impact upon human and environmental health, is entering a crucial phase.

After collecting thousands of soil samples, monitoring air conditions, conducting studies on fish and wildlife, surveying garden vegetables and doing other tests, the group conducting the study is ready to begin looking at what its findings mean.

Glenn Ferguson, a member of the SARA (Sudbury Area Risk Assessment) Group, made a presentation to

the PAC about the human health risk assessment (HHRA) methodology at Cambrian College.

The HHRA will evaluate the potential for the occurrence of "adverse health effects" from exposure to chemicals of concern such as nickel, copper, arsenic, cobalt, lead and selenium.

Brian McMahon, a Ministry of the Environment representative on the Sudbury Soils Study's technical committee, asked Ferguson if the HHRA would be looking at the issue of acceptable and unacceptable health risks.

Setting 'risk thresholds'

Ferguson said regulatory agencies acknowledge it's impossible to "completely eliminate carcinogens."

So, they establish "acceptable risk thresholds," which, in Ontario, is basically one in a million chances that exposure to chemicals of concern may result in a health hazard.

Ferguson said the SARA Group will establish what the level of soil contamination is in Sudbury.

It will be up to the technical committee, the group comprised of representatives of the six partners in the study, to decide what the risk level is.

The Ministry of the Environment called on Inco and Falconbridge Ltd.

to fund a major study of the soils in the Sudbury district after its own tests showed elevated levels of several chemicals of concern.

Other partners in the study, besides the two mining giants and the ministry, are the City of Greater Sudbury, the Sudbury and District Health Unit and Health Canada.

Ivan Filion, past chairman of the PAC, said the soil study's findings are bound to be more complicated than, "Go home, don't worry," and "Listen, we have to talk about this."

Ferguson confirmed that there will likely be different findings for "different communities of interest."

When the study began, it was thought that communities such as Copper Cliff, Coniston and Falconbridge, original smelter sites for the mining giants in Sudbury, might reasonably have greater levels of soil contamination.

Ferguson said the study is also looking at the level of "background" contamination that exists in Sudbury — contamination that would naturally occur in mineral-rich soils whether smelting operations had been conducted or not.

Gary Hrytsak, vice-chairman of the PAC, said one of the fears is that the study will conclude that "it's all normal background (contamination) even though it's hazardous."