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Plan to deal with tainted soil not expected until 2005

Study needs to be completed before a plan to address arsenic-laced soil can be developed

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THE SUDBURY STAR

Despite extremely high arsenic levels uncovered in Falconbridge's soil, no decisions will be made about how to decrease those levels until after the Sudbury Soils Study's 2005 completion.

"We can't pin that down until we get a good measure of the levels of metals in all areas, soil, air and water," said ESG International risk assessor Christopher Wren, whose consulting firm is conducting the Sudbury Soils Study.

About 12,000 soil samples were collected and examined for the study, an effort to determine the effects on humans of elevated metal levels in Sudbury's soil from a century of mining.

The soil collection will be followed this summer with the collection of food, water and air samples.

Preliminary data from the soil samples revealed last week that the arsenic content in Falconbridge is about 100 parts per million, five times the MOE's guidelines.

This prompted concerns of town residents, ranging from decreased property values to the health risks of kids playing on soccer fields.

Many of those concerns were raised during question-and-answer meetings held in Copper Cliff, Coniston and Falconbridge.

"It was obvious people had some concerns," said Scott Albion, manager of human resources and training at Falconbridge Limited's Sudbury smelter.

Albion said Falconbridge will have another meeting with town residents next week to explore the issues.

"One thing we can do is marshal the resources," said Albion. "The first thing we need to know is what the interests are."

But he also said any decisions about how to alleviate the problem likely won't be made until the study is finished.

"A lot of study and analysis has to go on," said Albion. "It's too early to tell."

Please see SOIL / A4

Soil: **options will be considered after study**

Continued from page A1

Wren was "hesitant to speculate," but said there are a number of options when, and if, a decision must be made.

One of those, he said, is to cover exposed soil with grass. In another procedure, called phyto remediation, plants that accumulate high concentrations of metals could be put in the ground to draw those metals out of the soil.

"In an extreme case, the soil could be removed," said Wren.

Ed Wierzbicki, environmental support officer for the Sudbury and District Health Unit's health protection division, said there is no need worry that those decisions are still a long way off.

"There is no need for remedial action today," he said. "... There is a very low risk. You'd almost have to eat the soil."

Wren said similar studies done in Wawa and Deloros, where the soil concentrations were similar to Sudbury, confirm the risks are low.

But those studies were different, said Wren, because the Deloros and Wawa mining operations are shut down and no longer produce the metals. He said the current study in Sudbury, the largest of its kind, is still necessary to determine what the effects of continued metal accumulation will mean for Sudburians down the road.

"This is to make sure it's safe now and in the future," said Wren.

Wierzbicki agreed.

"We cannot say there is 100 per cent no risk, even though we believe there is a low risk," said Wierzbicki. "We don't have the expertise yet. Within two years we'll have a comprehensive study that will let us know if there are any long-term effects."