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Activists want Inco, Falco off Sudbury Soil Study committee

If you pay the piper, do you get to pick the tunes? That was the question debated, sometimes loudly, Wednesday at a public information session on the work the Sudbury Soils Study is doing.

Inco Ltd. and Falconbridge Ltd. are funding the \$4.5 million study and have representation on the technical committee. This committee will determine if area soils need to be decontaminated—at Inco and Falconbridge's expense. (Other members are representatives from the Sudbury & District Health Unit, the Ministry of the Environment, Health Canada and the City of Greater Sudbury.)

According to retired United Steelworkers' warhorse and long-time health and safety activist Homer Seguin, it's a clear case of conflict of interest.

"We need independent people conducting this study," Seguin said. "...If there's any remedial work that needs to be done, if they find there is human health problems or environmental damage, they are financially responsible for cleaning it up. And they have a vote on it?"

Seguin wants both nickel companies to do the honourable thing and remove themselves from the technical committee.

In September 2001, the Ministry of the Environment (MOE), in conjunction with the Sudbury and District Medical Officer of Health, ordered Inco and Falconbridge to conduct a human health risk assessment in the Greater Sudbury area.

The aim of the study is to determine if 120 years of mining has negatively affected the health of local residents. To aid in their assessment, the mining companies were given access to the latest MOE soil samples – samples that have historically shown elevated levels of such heavy metals as nickel, copper, cobalt and arsenic in the Greater City of Sudbury.

Nickel Belt MPP Shelley Martel is calling on the minister of the Environment to order Inco and Falconbridge off the technical committee. In a statement made before the Ontario legislature June 3, 2003, Martel asked: "How likely is it that Inco and Falconbridge will want evidence of significant problems made public? (And) how likely is it they'll come forward with plans for remedial work if this is going to be costly?"

Also attending a news conference Wednesday regarding the study, were representatives from Neighbours Helping Neighbours, a community organization addressing heavy metal contamination in Port Colborne, along with Eric Gillespie, legal counsel for 1,500 of that community's residents affected by contamination.

"First and foremost, we share the same concerns that Shelley Martel, Homer Seguin and other members of this community share," Gillespie said.

For the last three years, Port Colborne's been going through an almost identical process, and Sudburians need to deal with the conflict of interest issue now, at the outset of the process, he said.

The approach that's being tried here leaves people very skeptical, he said.

"It leaves a big question of credibility that will always hang over any process where the people who will have to pay at the end of the day have control," he said.

Why should the mining industry have more say in the matter than the public? he asked.

Ivan Fillion, chair of Sudbury's Public Advisory Committee, takes exception to Gillespie's implication.

"It denigrates the professionalism of people like me," said Fillion, who also sits on the technical committee, and is the executive director of Research, Technology and Advanced Learning at Cambrian College.

"This is a scientific study," he said. "They've got a process observer, they've got a local citizen's committee they can bounce things off of, and they've also agreed, as with all scientific studies, to have it peer reviewed."

Franco Mariotti, staff scientist with Science North, and now independent process observer for the study, said checks are in place to ensure there is no conflict of interest.

"...The creation of my position, the creation of the public advisory committee, the independent scientific peer review of the research itself, those are unique Sudbury creations, everything to ensure that everything is above board and no decisions are hidden and information kept from the public."

Mariotti added his latest report, his fourth, criticized the public advisory committee for not meeting enough. They meet four times a year, "and since their primary role is to advise the decision making group, the technical committee, their frequency of meetings is not frequent enough to make an impact on the technical committee.

—*With files from Michael James and Bill Bradley*