

Study set to confirm or allay 100 years of suspicions

Soils study could show local hot spots, says biologist

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

The Sudbury Soils Study may help answer one of the most important questions anyone living in Sudbury could ask themselves, says a Sudbury biologist.

That question, according to Franco Mariotti, is this: "Should I be concerned about living and raising a family here?"

People interested in the answer to that question — and it's not a simple one — should plan to attend Tuesday's meeting of the public advisory committee for the Sudbury Soils Study.

Mariotti is the independent process observer of the three-year, \$5-million study that has come under fire in recent months.

Critics have complained the

study's results could be perceived to be less than credible because two of its six partners are the mining giants in Sudbury.

Inco and Falconbridge Ltd. were ordered to pay for the study by the Ministry of the Environment.

Ministry tests have shown elevated metal levels of nickel, copper, cobalt, arsenic and other "metals of concern" in the soil in several areas of Sudbury.

These minerals all occur naturally in soil, but studies assume higher amounts in surface soil are a result of mining, smelting and refining activities.

The Sudbury Soils Study is examining the soil in several parts of the city, particularly those close to smelter operations in Copper Cliff, Falconbridge and Coniston.

It is also conducting a health-risk assessment to determine what the effect of those elevated mineral levels might be on people.

Please see STUDY / A5

Study: information will lead to solutions for problem spots

Continued from page A1

"This is an extremely significant study in the history of this city," says Mariotti.

"All of the suspicions of the last 100 years" about the effects of mining on human and environmental health may be addressed in this study.

As a result of information collected, "truthful and logical remediation plans" can be made.

Those remediation plans simply cannot be made without the type of raw data the study will provide, he adds.

As well as the mining companies, representatives from the Ministry of the Environment, the Sudbury and District Health Unit, the City of Greater Sudbury and Health Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch make up the technical committee that is overseeing the study.

The public advisory committee provides advice to the technical committee and comments on its decisions.

Mariotti's role is to be an impartial observer of the process and to offer advice. He also reports to the public four times a year on the study process.

Initially, Mariotti's yearly honorarium was being paid by Inco and Falconbridge, as is the cost of the study.

But Mariotti recommended, and the technical committee accepted, that his salary be paid by all six partners to avoid even the appearance that his observations might not be unbiased.

The staff scientist at Science North is well known in the community, but he is quick to point out his role as process observer is completely separate from his work at the science centre.

Mariotti is convinced the Sudbury Soils Study process is working, despite criticism of it.

Critics have suggested Inco and Falconbridge, who are voting members of the technical committee, could unduly influence the study's results since they would be responsible for the cost of remediation, should it be required.

"If you sit in on those (technical committee) meetings, those are not what I see," says Mariotti firmly.

He is also convinced that, when the study's results are released, they will show that there are certain areas in Sudbury where there are elevated levels of metals of concern in the soil.

"There will be hot spots," says Mariotti. "Let's have the data (about them)."

The process to remove those metals from the soil is simple, although it is expensive, says Mariotti.

The metals are normally contained in the top five centimetres or so of earth, although traces of them can leach to further depths with decades of rainfall.

Other factors are being looked at as well, such as the effect of that topsoil being blown to other areas, says Mariotti.

The bottom line to him is that Sudbury residents owe it to themselves to become informed about the Sudbury Soils Study and to follow its progress.

Eric Gillespie, a Toronto lawyer representing some Port Colborne residents in lawsuits against Inco Ltd. over contaminated soils, has been following the Sudbury Soils Study closely. He plans to attend Tuesday's meeting.

He would like to see private citizens play a greater role in the study and have the scientific support and resources to keep up with the process as it is unfolding.

People interested in the Sudbury Soils Study can check the group's Web site at www.sudburysoilsstudy.com.