

Unions' attack on Soils Study justified

Dear Editor:

Re: Protect the Soils Study —
Sept. 17.

Your editorial is misleading and has outright wrong inferences. It also improperly reports facts and has important omissions.

I, and the leading representatives of the United Steelworkers of America and the Canadian Auto Workers, are attempting to save the Soils Study by correcting the major flaws in it. The best way to defeat the value of the study is to do nothing to correct its major flaws.

You say Inco and Falconbridge agreed to pay for the \$5-million study, and say they should be allowed to participate on the technical committee.

In a media release dated Sept. 12, 2001, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment announced it was "requiring Inco and Falconbridge to conduct" this study. Volunteering after being ordered to do so is not really volunteering.

Your view that Inco and Falconbridge are not in conflict by being voting members of the decision-making technical committee of the Soils Study flies in the face of various conflicts of interest legislation, and the companies' historic practice of putting profits before everything.

Your editorial is also critical of the unions raising the issue of conflict of interest 18 months after the committee was established. On this point I can verify that this technical committee, structure and operating methods have only recently come to light.

It has been only a few months since this technical committee structure became common knowledge. This is because they operate in secret: no media, no public at meetings, and no minutes are available. In fact, this writer raised this issue as soon as he became aware of the seriousness of the conflict of interest and secrecy months ago.

Your editorial also incorrectly reports the unions requested to replace the companies' representatives on the technical committee. The unions asked that the companies be removed because they are in a major conflict of interest. The unions asked that Inco and Falconbridge be placed on the public advisory committee, and allowed full input, but no votes.

As a totally separate matter, the union requested positions on the technical committee because the USWA and CAW represent employees at Inco and Falconbridge. Therefore, they should be given positions on the technical committee because there are many thousands of members who are at the greatest health risk because they would be exposed to the same carcinogens and toxins at work and at home.

Additionally, the unions' letters pointed out that the unions are mandated by law and their constitutions to represent the safety and health of their members, and further, the unions had hands-on experience dealing with these heavy-metal carcinogens and toxins, and the unions have no conflict of interest or monetary involvement.

By omission, *The Star* deserves severe criticism for failing to even mention that the technical committee operates by consensus, so Inco and/or Falconbridge can veto any matter it wishes. The technical committee does not operate by a major decision as most democratic institutions do. Additionally, the unions recommended all technical committee meetings be open to the media and at least sometimes to the public, in lieu of the current strictly secret meetings. Even minutes are secret, if they exist at all.

The Star should be leading the call for openness, but chooses instead to support Inco and Falconbridge in this secret technical committee process. Freedom of the media means access and reporting to the public. If they remain in voting positions, the Soils Study report will be subject to legitimate criticism and face ongoing demands for corrections.

Where is *The Star's* integrity?

One person as process observer is not adequate acting for the public's interest, especially as he is paid by the technical committee he supposedly watches.

And, finally, *The Star's* unfounded innuendo that the union is raising labour-company antagonism is totally wrong-headed.

To protect the Soils Study, Inco and Falconbridge must get off the technical committee. It is still not too late to save it.

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