

Falconbridge residents to be tested

Nickel giant will fund urinary arsenic study

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

The SARA Group will conduct a urinary arsenic study on residents of the town of Falconbridge next summer, funded Falconbridge Ltd.

The nickel giant has commissioned the Sudbury Area Risk Assessment Group, which is conducting the Sudbury Soils Study, to develop and implement the test.

Chris Wren, director of the SARA Group, said the group expects to design the study and develop a questionnaire to accompany it by spring.

The study, however, won't be conducted until late summer. That timing is crucial, said Wren, because residents will have had maximum exposure to soil contaminated with arsenic because of the time they have spent outdoors.

Falconbridge residents were thrown into a panic in May when the Sudbury and District Health Unit notified them the arsenic level in the town's soil was the highest in the City of Greater Sudbury — and five times the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's guidelines.

Health unit officials notified Falconbridge residents by visiting them door-to-door, based on preliminary findings of the Sudbury Soils Study. The study gathered thousands of soil samples.

The health unit is one of six partners in the soils study.

Health officials also cautioned the results weren't as alarming as they seemed and issued guidelines to avoid contamination.

The Falconbridge Citizens' Committee was struck some time after that, as residents sought answers to questions about possible health risks from arsenic soil levels and fears about their property values declining.

Wren said Falconbridge Ltd. told residents it would do "what it takes" to address residents' concerns.

One of the actions suggested was the urinary arsenic study.

Unlike soil sampling, this study will test for the presence of arsenic in the bodies of people who live in the town.

Participation in the study will be voluntary, said Wren, but the more people who participate in it, the more accurate it will be.

Developing the test is a long process, he said. There has already been some criticism of the fact SARA is conducting the urinary arsenic study.

The three-year, \$5-million Sudbury Soils Study that SARA is undertaking is being financed by Inco and Falconbridge, at the recommendation of the Ministry of the Environment.

That recommendation came after the ministry's own tests showed higher than normal levels of "metals of concern" such as arsenic,

nickel and cadmium in Sudbury soils, particularly in areas where the mining companies operated smelters.

Critics fear the results of the Sudbury Soils Study — and even the arsenic testing on Falconbridge residents — will be questioned because of the nickel companies' involvement.

But Wren maintains those studies will be valid as they will be reviewed by outside experts.

He points out that two similar studies were conducted on residents of Wawa and of Balmertown, a gold mining town near Red Lake.

Both showed that while people had been exposed to chemicals of concern, they posed no health risks.

Arsenic has an "infamous" reputation, said Wren, and yet it has a "half-life" in the body of about two weeks and does not build up in the system.

This will be the first such test conducted on residents who live in the small town, although workers at Falconbridge operations have been tested.

Scott Albion, a spokesman for Falconbridge Ltd., said the company is working closely with residents of its host town to allay their concerns.

Albion attended a meeting of the Falconbridge Citizens' Committee last week and said it was "really positive ... an excellent start for the committee."

Falconbridge officials attended to provide general information to resi-

dents and to provide them with access to the resources of the SARA Group.

"Lack of information always concerns people," said Albion.

Realtor Cathy Gregorchuk was at the recent public meeting.

A former resident of Falconbridge, she has maintained an interest in the town, both personally and professionally.

Several people have complained to her about property values declining, she said, and expressed concerns Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. is no longer insuring new mortgages on houses in Falconbridge.

But she points out property assessments are dropping in all areas of the city, "and not necessarily because of the environment."

After attending the meeting, Gregorchuk said she is confident, if soils in Falconbridge and other areas of Sudbury are found to be contaminated, "Inco and Falconbridge will fix it. That's the most important thing. Inco and Falconbridge are good people. They will fix it."

Gregorchuk, a broker at Re/Max Crown Realty, said she feels comfortable with the fact residents won't be left "high and dry" in the town "if there is an issue" with soils.

She also pointed out that while CMHC may not insure mortgages, other private firms, such as GE Capital Mortgage Insurance of Canada, will.