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# Mining firms seek access guarantees

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OTTAWA — A committee representing northern mining interests has proposed that the federal Government guarantee almost unlimited access by mining companies for exploration and development on lands in the North.

In the first of a series of reports to Northern Development Minister Hugh Faulkner, a special consultative committee of mining company and northern territorial government representatives has also proposed that all mineral rights for northern lands "remain vested in the Crown."

Both recommendations could spark a direct confrontation with natives in the two northern territories who are trying to obtain land settlement agreements with the federal Government that would almost certainly include outright ownership of some areas of the North and exclusive access to other northern lands.

The recommendation, which Ottawa seems unlikely to accept as proposed, could also create problems for non-native northern residents if private ownership of large tracts of northern land is permitted.

The proposals are part of a wide-ranging review of the federal Government's often-criticized northern mineral policy and are the first instance in which an affected group — in this case the mining industry — has ever been consulted ahead of the publication of the Government's proposals for policy changes.

The consultative committee was formed late last year after a meeting in Yellowknife between Yukon and Northwest Territories mining industry representatives and Mr. Faulkner, who was becoming increasingly concerned about the growing criticism of northern mineral policy by the industry.

A fourth meeting of the committee is scheduled for later this week in Vancouver on the same day that Mr. Faulkner is scheduled to make the first public comments about the consultative process and areas of possible change in the northern mineral policy. A final report from the consultative committee is due in April.

In a preliminary report, the industry committee proposed policy areas for ministerial consideration. The committee is now developing specific strategies for implementing the policy recommendations if they are accepted by the Government.

In addition to what will be regarded as "motherhood"

policies — such as the fact that the Government should take on the role of "fostering and encouraging" exploration and development for non-renewable resources in the northern territories and should establish means for continuing consultation with the industry — the committee also calls for a number of potentially contentious changes.

For example, it wants direct government aid in the

development of an economic infrastructure for northern mining despite the developing federal policy to get away from such direct assistance and instead provide help through tax breaks for infrastructure development undertaken by industry.

In addition to proposing a better balance between economic development and environmental protection (a sore point for the mining industry, especially in light

of the government restrictions on uranium exploration in the Baker Lake area of the Northwest Territories), the committee says environmental protection areas (including parks) should be the "minimum size required" for attaining the protection objective.

In calling for all northern mineral rights to remain vested in the Crown, the committee is in effect challenging the Government's actions under a recent land claim settlement in the Mackenzie River delta area and in the northern Yukon with the Inuit's Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement.

Officials said that settlement would include the return of mineral rights in some areas to the native peoples covered by the settlement, as well as the removal of some lands from possible mineral exploration for use in a national park.

The mining industry does not wish to have any mineral rights alienated in such a fashion. It wants to be able to get permission to explore and develop from the federal Government only.

In a similar move, the industry committee is pushing for guaranteed access in all areas for exploration and development, except for very limited areas (such as wildlife refuge areas of parks) where such activity would be specifically disallowed.

The federal review of the current minerals policy in the North will also deal with fiscal policies, notably royalties. Federal officials say royalties in the northern territories are already the lowest in the country.

Mr. Faulkner has said he expects to continue to have royalties at a level lower than anywhere else (a not-so-subtle hint that increases may be in the offing) and will consider ways of varying the manner in which royalties are assessed in particular cases — perhaps depending on risks, costs and finds.

The Government has also agreed to review the mineral regulatory apparatus, in response to criticism of overregulation by the mining industry, especially in the environmental protection area.

However, Mr. Faulkner has indicated that while he will agree to review situations where it can be shown that regulations are either overly restrictive or unnecessary, he has no intention of subordinating environmental protection to mining industry goals.