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Yellowknife mines could face new pollution rules

Complaints about a gold mine that has dumped ^{air emissions} arsenic and sulphur dioxide into the North for generations could lead to new national regulations on the pollutants.

"We cannot use the water now . . . plants cannot grow in the contaminated soils," Isadore Tsetta, a Yellowknives Dene elder, told environmental hearings last May.

"Giant mines and Con mines have ruined the water and we cannot use it any more."

Federal Environment Minister Sheila Copps has promised to release proposals by November for controlling emissions at the Giant mine on the outskirts of Yellowknife.

Enforceable regulations on releasing arsenic into the air are likely to be among those proposals, said Laura Johnston of the Environment Department in Yellowknife.

"Air emissions are one of the blanks in terms of there not being regulations."

The territorial government has also promised regulations on sulphur dioxide emissions by 1996, said Emery Pacquin of the Environmental Protection Department.

The Giant mine has released tonnes of arsenic, a toxic carcinogen, and sulphur dioxide, a leading cause of acid rain, into the atmosphere from its ore processor since it opened in the late 1930s.

It is the only mine in the area still using that type of processor.

In 1993, a government study was commissioned after residents complained of dead and dying vegetation around the mine.

The study found sulphur dioxide levels in downtown Yellowknife exceeded the desirable limit 16 times between August and September 1992.

The level exceeded the acceptable limit -- above which environmental damage occurs -- four times between September and November.

Sulphur dioxide is also being monitored on the Yellowknives Dene reserve, from which the Giant mine is visible.

Arsenic levels in the fish and water of Back Bay, on Great Slave Lake, are generally within safe limits, says another government report.

But fish, water and lake sediments near Baker Creek, which runs past the mine, all have elevated levels of arsenic, the report states.

The Dene have stopped eating fish from the area, says band environmental consultant Susan Qurik. And while the water has been examined, the people have not, she says.

"The elders say they can see the effect on the land but nobody has looked at the effects on the people."

Royal Oak, the owner of Giant mine, is working with the government on controlling the mine's emissions, said company spokesman Graham Eacott.

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