

## Canada

# Arsenic fears raised at Yellowknife hearings

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Yellowknife

Long used to small amounts of arsenic in the air they breathe, Yellowknife residents are increasingly concerned about an underground mountain of it beneath their feet.

About 3,800 tonnes of highly toxic arsenic trioxide is stored in unused tunnels in the Giant gold mine just outside this northern city.

Yellowknife residents told federal environmental and health officials this week they feared the highly soluble chemical could leach into local creeks and Great Slave Lake, ultimately poisoning humans.

"We have enough arsenic

**"We have enough  
arsenic stored  
underground to kill the  
entire planet ..."**

— Ron Kent

stored underground to kill the entire planet and that is the issue that needs to be discussed here," Ron Kent told the panel.

The hearing was convened to discuss ways to cut the 30 kilograms a day of arsenic that puffs out Giant's smokestack.

But even panel members admitted airborne arsenic isn't a major health risk in Yellowknife. Instead, speaker after speaker from the floor

brought up the huge underground stockpile.

"We want to keep a focus on the arsenic trioxide stored underground because that is a large potential risk," said Elaine Berthelet of the Canadian Public Health Association.

Health Canada says arsenic can cause cancer.

Arsenic dust is one of the byproducts of extracting gold from gold ore. At Giant mine it is put in barrels and hauled to mined-out horizontal shafts, or stopes, which are sealed with a concrete plug, said Ed Collins, chief environmental engineer with Environment Canada.

Giant is the only operating mine in Canada with such a stockpile. The storage is safe as

long as the tunnels remain stable and the mine keeps pumping out and treating water that leaches down its shafts, Collins said.

If the mine flooded, arsenic would inevitably find its way into Great Slave Lake, he said.

The original plan counted on permafrost to seal the stopes from groundwater. But Collins said no studies were done to find out if there was permafrost in the area.

Royal Oak Mines, Giant mine's owner, is currently conducting these studies as a requirement for the renewal of one of its operating permits.

Giant's water licence expires in 1998. Hearings on its renewal are expected in the fall.



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127