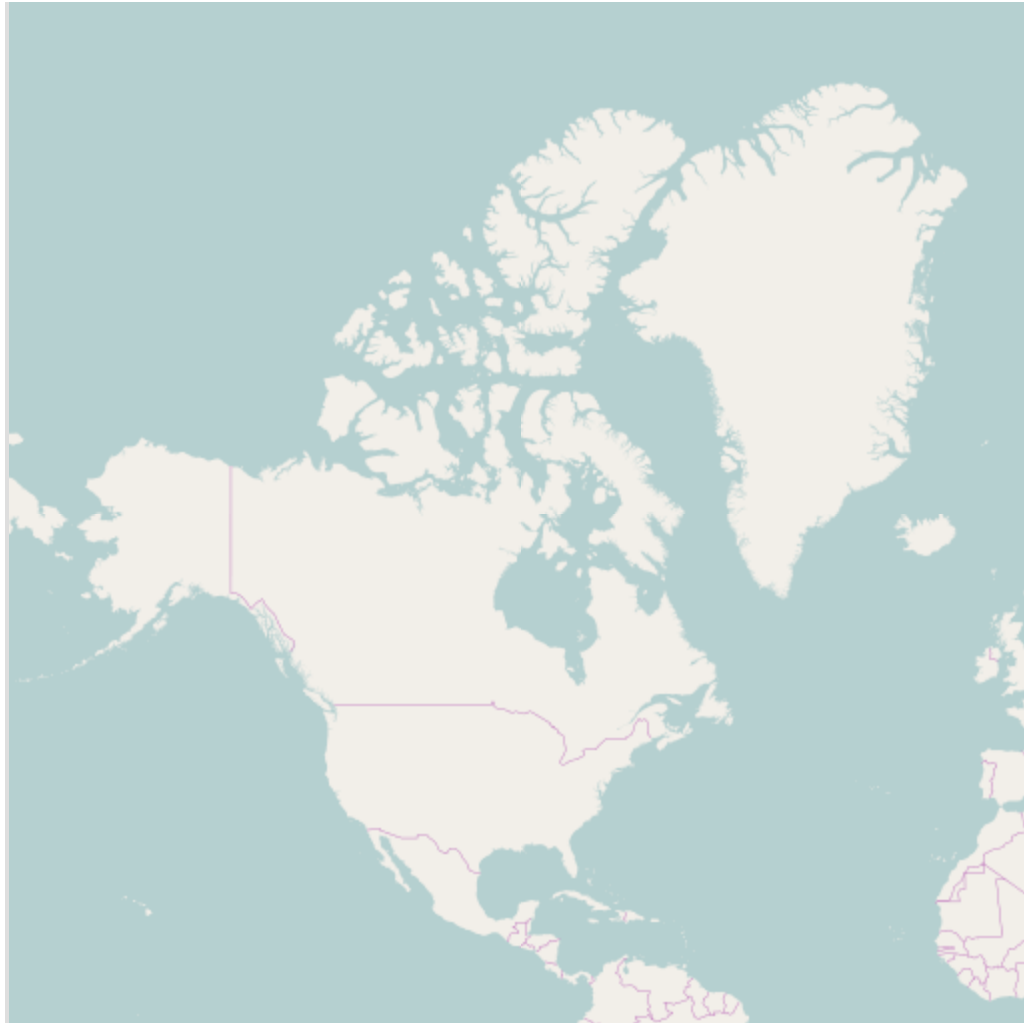


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The Giant Mine: Will Reason Prevail?



Leaflet | OSM Mapnik

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The Giant Mine operated at the edge of the city of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, from 1948 to 2004. As the gold-bearing ore was processed, the mine generated a toxic by-product, arsenic trioxide – a proven non-threshold carcinogen. For the first three years of operations, the arsenic trioxide went straight up the stack and then came down on the surrounding land and water, killing at least one Dene child and local milk cows. The family of the dead child received \$750 as compensation.

Rather than stop the toxic mining operation, the government gave tacit approval to storing the arsenic trioxide underground. There are now 237,000 tonnes of it stored in mined out areas and some purpose-built chambers. Picture a 10-storey building and then multiply that by 7.5 times. That's the amount of arsenic trioxide stored underground. It's probably enough to kill the entire human race several times over. Arsenic trioxide is very soluble in water and it is leaching out of the underground storage areas, although it is being pumped out and treated as part of the overall minewater management.

Following a [horrendous labour dispute](#), the mine went into receivership in 1999 and is now a public liability. The federal and territorial governments (all of us as taxpayers) are on the hook for the remediation. A remediation plan was finally developed in 2005 with limited public involvement. Despite a recommendation from its technical advisors to subject the plan to an environmental assessment, it took a mandatory referral from the City of Yellowknife to send the plan to an open public review process. The

assessment process ended in June of this year with the release of a report by the [Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board](#).

What's the government's plan? Essentially, freeze the arsenic trioxide underground, forever. No long-term funding, no ongoing research and development into something more permanent, no plan for perpetual care of the site.

Despite claims from the government that there was widespread public support for its plan, not one person came forward in favour of it during the environmental assessment. The government wrongly concluded that public concern was with the existing condition of the site, not its inadequate plan to simply stabilize the site. Many of us would prefer an option where the government actually works with the community to implement a remediation plan that includes freezing as an interim solution, independent oversight, and ongoing research and development into something more permanent.

The environmental assessment dragged on for five long years, largely due to government bungling in providing submissions and responding to information requests. The project managers had largely boxed themselves in by going forward to the federal funders with a remediation plan that did not have a social licence. Little progress was made on key issues like perpetual care, independent oversight, long-term funding, or ongoing research and development. As it was, total project costs were only revealed after the public hearing, following an Access to Information Request: an estimated \$903 million – and more than likely to increase.

To the credit of the environmental assessment process and the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board that carried it out, an excellent final report with twenty-six recommendations for binding measures was released on June 20, 2013. The governments' approach and plan were largely rejected in favour of a hundred-year timeframe and requirements for a legally-binding agreement to establish independent environmental oversight, ongoing research and development, and much more. The report lays out a solid and collaborative path forward for the remediation to begin.

The report has received widespread praise, including a unanimous motion of support from Yellowknife City Council. The Yellowknives Dene First Nation, the North Slave Metis Alliance, Yellowknife Members of the Legislative Assembly, and the local MP, Denis Bevington, have all indicated their support. A motion of support from the Legislative Assembly of the NWT was also passed this week.

This is one of those rare modern day environmental assessments that actually worked. It has incorporated public and Aboriginal input and in doing so gained a broad base of support.

The fate of the Giant Mine and the remediation plan now lies with federal and territorial Ministers. The reasonable next step is for the Ministers to accept the report and its recommendations, which would then become binding conditions on the project moving forward. If the report and its recommendations are rejected, the whole project goes off to a higher level of scrutiny that will include an evaluation of alternatives – something that no one really wants at this point. The Ministers could also refer matters back to the Review Board, but it's not clear what that would really do. The last option is to enter into a murky world of "consultations" to change or modify the report and its recommendations into something that the ministers will accept. We are now onwards of four months since the report was released. Will reason prevail?

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