

Public Consultation on Uranium Industry Issues in Québec

THE BAPE REPORT IS NOW PUBLIC

After working on the subject for a year, the BAPE commission has concluded that it would be counter-indicated, in the present context, to allow uranium mining operations in Québec.

David Heurtel, Québec's Minister of Sustainable Development, Environment and the Fight Against Climate Change, published the report of the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE) inquiry and public hearings on the subject of uranium industry issues. The inquiry commission tasked with reviewing this topic was chaired by Louis-Gilles Francoeur, seconded by commissioners Michèle Goyer and Joseph Zayed. It began work on May 20, 2014.

The inquiry commission held public sessions throughout Québec. Under the terms of its mandate, it also held joint hearings with two commissions created respectively by the James Bay Advisory Committee on the Environment and the Kativik Environmental Advisory Committee. Chapter 13 of the BAPE report, supported unanimously by the three commissions that sat jointly for sessions in Cree, Inuit and Naskapi territories, focuses on issues in Northern territories covered by the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement and the Northeastern Québec Agreement.

Limitations and Uncertainties

During its inquiry and hearings, the commission found that substantial progress has been made in recent decades in the areas of mining technology and waste confinement strategies, as a result of uranium mining experience in Canada and elsewhere in the world. On the other hand, many scientific and technological limitations and uncertainties still persist and numerous questions have yet to be answered. These limitations and uncertainties are exacerbated by the fact that uranium waste is radioactive and can pose a problem for thousands of years. Moreover, the most recent confinement technique recommended in Canada has been in use for only 30 years. How is it possible to assert that this technology will prove to be reliable in the longer term, since it will take many decades to monitor and assess its efficiency and reliability? Older technologies are considered outdated today, even though they were thought to offer lasting solutions when first introduced.

In addition to these limitations and uncertainties, there are some equally significant gaps in scientific knowledge of the impacts of uranium mining on the environment and public health. As a result, the experts are divided; some believe current knowledge provides sufficient grounds to move forward, while others believe it does not. Clearly, opinions on this issue are far from unanimous, and there is no substantial scientific or social consensus. Given this situation, the participants at the hearings were almost unanimous in their rejection of uranium sector development.

Accordingly, the inquiry commission has concluded that it would be premature, at this time, to authorize uranium industry development in Québec.

Possible choices

In the commission's view, the Québec Government could decide to suspend uranium mining either temporarily or permanently. However, because of its potential legal and economic impacts, such a decision should not be made in haste, so as to minimize its cost.

On the other hand, if the Government decides to open the door to uranium mining in Québec, it must satisfy three requirements. First, it must ensure that social acceptability is present. This will not be possible without an extensive information program and a cooperation and consensus-building strategy.

Second, the commission stipulates in the report that sustained efforts are required, over a long period, to generate enough reliable knowledge to overcome technological uncertainties and current gaps in scientific knowledge.

Third, the Government must take the time it needs to develop a legal framework compatible with the respective missions of its departments, that will allow it to control uranium mining operations by means of rules that are harmonized with federal legislation through a federal-provincial agreement.

Realistically, the commission believes it will take several years to achieve these conditions. Accordingly, it feels it would be inappropriate to authorize uranium mining in Québec in the present context.

AVAILABILITY OF THE REPORT

The inquiry and public hearing report on uranium industry issues is now available at the consultation centres, at the BAPE's documentation centres, and on the BAPE website at www.bape.gouv.qc.ca. You may also order a copy from the BAPE office, either by e-mail (communication@bape.gouv.qc.ca), or by telephone (418 643-7447 if calling from the Québec City region, or toll-free at 1 800 463-4732). The number of printed copies is limited.