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For Immediate Release

Nalcor downplaying elevated concentrations of methylmercury in Muskrat Falls reservoir

The Nunatsiavut Government is raising concerns over recent assertions by Nalcor Energy that increases in concentration of methylmercury in the Muskrat Falls reservoir and Churchill River are in line with what was initially projected before impoundment.

“Nalcor is intentionally misrepresenting the numbers by suggesting that the concentrations of methylmercury are substantially lower than guideline levels in drinking water. This is not the issue nor the concern, but rather the increases in methylmercury in species like fish and seals,” says Lands and Natural Resources Minister Greg Flowers. “At some monitoring stations, methylmercury concentrations in water are higher than what Nalcor originally projected. This is concerning given it is already showing that Nalcor’s modelling is inaccurate, which has been the position of the Nunatsiavut Government for years.”

In fact, says Minister Flowers, current methylmercury concentrations from the flooding of the Muskrat Falls reservoir are more consistent with those projected by independent researchers at Harvard University, published in peer-reviewed literature. As a result of this research, the Nunatsiavut Government was adamant that the reservoir be fully cleared of vegetation and soil to reduce future methylmercury production. Despite this also being a recommendation of the Independent Expert Advisory Committee (IEAC), that work was not completed.

Additionally, the IEAC requested both of the methylmercury models of Nalcor and Ryan Calder (Harvard) be provided to the Expert’s Committee (established under the IEAC) for independent review, scrutiny and to make improvements. The Calder model was provided, reviewed, and adjusted based on feedback. Nalcor did not provide its model to the Expert’s Committee, despite having committed to doing so.

It should not come as a surprise that Nalcor’s modeling and projections are inaccurate, says Minister Flowers, given the unwillingness to allow independent evaluation by the IEAC.

It is anticipated that Nalcor’s modeling of increases in methylmercury concentrations will continue to be inaccurate moving forward, which is why extensive monitoring is critical to understanding potential impacts on the Lake Melville ecosystem, the Minister adds

“It is important to clarify that the increased methylmercury concentrations observed in the Churchill River and mouth of Lake Melville are a result of increases in the Muskrat Falls reservoir. They are not a result of increases in Lake Melville. This isn’t to say that increases are not going to happen in Lake Melville, but currently that is not the case. If there are increases in methylmercury in the Lake Melville ecosystem in species like fish and seals, they won’t be observed yet. This is because methylmercury first needs to bio-accumulate in the smaller part of the food web, like plankton, and then concentrations bio-magnify when larger species eat those smaller species. This whole process takes time, over a span of years.”

Minister Flowers stressed the importance of protecting the health and wellbeing of people while understanding the potential impacts to the Lake Melville ecosystem. This can only be achieved by using the best available knowledge and a robust and trusted monitoring program, he says.

“This program needs to be implemented immediately to understand the potential impacts downstream in the Lake Melville ecosystem, especially given that it is clear that Nalcor’s models are underestimating increases in concentrations of methylmercury.”

Despite concerns with Nalcor’s modelling, the Minister is still encouraging the harvesting and consumption of healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate food like fish, birds and seals from Lake Melville.

Meanwhile, staff with the Department of Lands and Natural Resources is planning to hold meetings this winter with Beneficiaries of the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement residing in Rigolet and Upper Lake Melville to discuss ongoing concerns related to Muskrat Falls, as well as to provide an overview on the Nunatsiavut Government’s monitoring programs.

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