Premier dismisses uranium exploration concerns

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A sign opposing uranium mining is seen on Highway 14 near Falls Lake, N.S.

CATHERINE CERVIN AND SARAH TRASK

On Oct. 3, we were at the Nova Scotia legislature with more than 30 petitioners who travelled from communities across Nova Scotia to support the tabling of a petition signed by over 7,000 Nova Scotians.

The petition demanded a reinstatement of the reasonable and scientifically sound ban on uranium exploration and mining that protected our environment and livelihoods for the past 44 years. Sadly, Premier Tim Houston appears to have been misinformed and misled by his advisers on this issue.

Surely given his stated values — “I am a Nova Scotian. I care about the land, the earth, the water and future generations” — the premier could not in conscience have lifted the ban if he understood the science behind it.

The premier appears to be misinformed in that he believes that evaluation of risks need only begin when a project is proposed. Why wouldn’t the consultation/evaluation begin before we run the risks of uranium exploration? Perhaps the premier is not aware of the risks and disruption of land exploration.

In its early stage, exploration “remove(s) the overburden to expose any mineral-bearing rocks below. Trenching, power washing and/or stripping remove the soil and vegetation down to bedrock. The next stage of exploration involves drilling core samples. Drills often go thousands of metres through solid rock to produce sample rock cores (and are) usually in a grid,” according to Joan Kuyek, author, researcher and co-founder of Mining Watch Canada.

Uranium exploration and mining is banned in a number of countries around the world. It is not allowed in British Columbia or Quebec, in part because from the moment an exploratory drill is placed into a uranium deposit, radon gas is released and travels wherever the wind blows. Radon is the second-most common cause of lung cancer after smoking.

Uranium is soluble in water. Disturbed uranium is a high risk to clean water. Once disturbed, uranium can be carried wherever water flows. Furthermore, after uranium is extracted from an ore body, 80-90 per cent of the radioactivity remains in the waste rock according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This waste rock remains radioactive for thousands of years. There is no way to guarantee the safety of the future generations the premier claims to care about.

The 5,700-acre site in Vaughan, where the Houston government invited companies to bid for uranium exploration rights, lies at the high point of two rural watersheds where hundreds of homes and businesses rely on wells for water. In 2023, this area experienced a catastrophic flash flood. Lakes and rivers overflowed their banks.

Torrents of water poured down to the Windsor floodplain, five kilometres from the Falmouth municipal water supply and eight kilometres from Windsor's. What if there had been a mine leaching uranium and radioactive waste into the floodwaters? The immediate and permanent damage is unthinkable.

We hear claims that in Saskatchewan, much of the population and some First Nations support it. The truth is virtually all the population of Saskatchewan lives 600 kilometres or more from the uranium mines in the dry northern region. Nova Scotia is nothing like Saskatchewan. We are small, densely populated, with high precipitation, many rivers, lakes and wetlands and low-grade uranium ore. Saskatchewan is the opposite of all of these and can mine its high-grade uranium far from populated areas with fewer risks in the short term.

Premier Houston has ignored and dismissed the reasonable concerns of over 7,000 community members who signed the petitions. People are legitimately worried about their children, their clean water, the animals in the fields and forests and the fish in the waters. The potential risks are long term and irreversible. Nova Scotians need a reinstatement of the ban on uranium mining until a full and unbiased evaluation of the risks and benefits is completed. We are confident that such an evaluation would show, once again, that the risks in Nova Scotia conditions far outweigh the benefits.

Until the ban is reinstated, there will be ongoing anxiety and frustration about the vulnerability and risks to the health of the people in communities across Nova Scotia.

The Houston government's actions on uranium are part of a disturbing pattern. Two bills introduced last month — Bill 137, fast tracking regulations for the mining industry and Bill 127, criminalizing protests and information gathering by forest protectors — indicate that this government continues to minimize meaningful environmental protection, science-based decision making and collaboration with First Nations and communities.

We call upon the premier to listen to his constituents, to learn about the science and the health effects of uranium and make it clear that he is not going to put the future of our children, our grandchildren and the environment at risk by allowing exploration or mining for uranium in Nova Scotia.

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