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Gypsum firm submits report

Province expected to make decision on expansion request in January

By GORDON DELANEY Valley Bureau

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Debate over a controversial gypsum mine expansion on the Avon Peninsula has heated up again.

Fundy Gypsum, a subsidiary of United States Gypsum Company of Chicago, has presented its revised environmental assessment to the new NDP government for a final decision on whether the project can proceed.

The government is expected to make its decision in January. Meanwhile, the public has until Nov. 23 to have its say.

Fundy Gypsum presented an environmental assessment to the former Tory government 18 months ago. But Mark Parent, environment minister at the time, sent it back to the company, asking for more detail, especially on the impacts on groundwater, surface water, species at risk, wetlands and fish habitat.

"We spent 18 months examining those areas," plant manager Mike Bishop said in an interview Tuesday. "There were more field studies, a lot more hydrogeological work and more computer modelling done, and the result was this report.

"We did quite a large amount of hydrogeological work, which involved well drilling, pump testing and computer modelling in order to have a good picture of what the ground and surface water situation would be over the estimated mine life," he said,

"It told us that there should be no major issues that can't be mitigated."

The report, paid for by the company, redefines the outline of the 46-hectare conservation area proposed south of the mine site to better ensure species at risk would be protected, Mr. Bishop said. "We also changed the footprint of the mine itself to avoid five wetland areas."

"And we determined once and for all that there was no fish habitat that would trigger any kind of federal involvement."

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The report says that 13 wetlands would be removed over the 40-year expected life of the mine, which would encompass 347 hectares near Avondale. The company expects to extract about 50 million tonnes of gypsum from the site over that time.

Mr. Bishop said the loss of wetlands will be mitigated by creating other wetlands nearby, known as wetland banking, as per government requirements.

The company used to employ 100 people, but laid off 40 workers last December because of the economic slump and the low U.S. demand for gypsum. The mine expansion would not create any new jobs, but help to maintain the existing ones.

The company, which has been mining the area for 50 years, says it will soon run out of gypsum at its Miller Creek and Wentworth mine sites near Windsor, and needs the expansion to continue.

But opponents want the proposed expansion halted, saying it would destroy valuable habitat on the Avon Peninsula and threaten local water sources.

"It's the same old story in more detail," Raymond Parker, president of the Avon Peninsula Watershed Preservation Society, said about the report Tuesday.

"They propose to basically destroy our watershed and then try to fix it with Band-aids," he said in an interview.

The society is requesting a more thorough federal environmental assessment, on top of the provincial assessment now underway.

"A huge industrial undertaking such as this can leave devastating effects and taxpayers with a huge bill for cleanup," said Heather Desveaux, a resident of the area and member of the preservation society.

"It's time for more public input but it's also time for the public to put pressure on the NDP government to push this to a full environmental assessment, given the fact that this is a small peninsular coastal area," she said.

"The gypsum industry up till this point has been virtually unaccountable," Ms. Desveaux added.

"And this company has had over 50 years to start progressive reclamation of its existing mine sites in Miller Creek and Wentworth. But we've have seen very little effort."

She added that because of the unique aspects of the area a conservation zone of any size would not be enough to mitigate the impacts of the mine.

"This is just more smoke and mirrors," she said of the report. "I feel it's misleading in lots of different aspects."

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