

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 708-19(2): ARSENIC REMEDIATION GUIDELINES

May 27, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. I'm sure he's already been briefed up on the excellent research by Messieurs Palmer and Jamison that proved the overestimation of natural background levels for arsenic in the Yellowknife area and the persistence of mining related arsenic after more than 60 years. We have an outdated 2003 arsenic remediation guideline that is based on this overestimation of background arsenic. Can the Minister tell us what the plans are now to review and update the drastically outdated arsenic remediation guideline. Merci, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister responsible for Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the Member for that question. I'm happy to tell the House the department is currently reviewing the 2003 environmental guidelines for contaminated sites remediation. This work is being done with new information on remediation criteria from the Canada Council of Ministers of the Environment as well a new data that has come on arsenic in the Yellowknife area.

ENR recognizes that the 2003 guidelines is dated, and the updating environmental guidance is standard practice as new data and scientific research is available. This work is nearly completed and will be finalized in the fall of 2021. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le Président. I want to thank the Minister for that. Yeah, I raised this in the context of even the Giant Mine environmental assessment where I wanted the board to look at the remediation guideline, but they declined to do that.

This old work that was done leading to the 2003 arsenic remediation guideline, it overestimated background levels by 5 to 10 times. Of course there's a lot of other research--even the Minister mentioned some--that has been done on the toxicology of arsenic since 2003, and much of that points to the need for lower exposure for humans. Will the Minister commit to having the human health risk assessment work associated with the GNWT 2003 arsenic remediation guideline reviewed and updated to be truly protective of human health. .

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The GNWT arsenic soil quality guidelines are being developed using the Canada Council Ministers of Environment framework, which is specific to both health, human health, and the environmental health.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Thanks to the Minister for that. I don't think I got a response. I wanted some work done on the human health assessment work that was done back on the 2003 guideline, but I'll pursue that separately with the Minister. Clearly, there's a need to review this arsenic remediation guideline which currently only includes two land uses for residential and industrial use.

So in reviewing this guideline, is the Minister committing to expand the land uses that are considered, and then what, of course, are the implications for the Giant Mine remediation.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Multiple land users are being considered for the GNWT arsenic soil quality guidelines, and this work is in the process of being finalized. The Giant Mine remediation project has approved a closure and remediation plans by the MacKenzie Valley Land and Water Board.

The criteria used by the projects were not solely based on the GNWT guidelines; they are site specific criteria for the Giant Mine that are confirmed through the human health and ecology risk assessment.

ENR has also led the development of the human health risk assessment for legacy offsite arsenic in the area surrounding Giant Mine. This work is near completion, and the public engagement is planned to begin in June of 2021. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Masi, Monsieur le Président. I want to thank the Minister for that. I think he answered most of my last question.

I don't want to sound alarmist, but in my statement today, I expressed that back in 2003, I had doubts about these remediation standards that were developed by this government. I don't think that it was just a coincidence that residential guideline for arsenic was set marginally above the known measurements of arsenic in soils in the residential built up areas of Yellowknife. So what assurance can the Minister provide to Yellowknifers that this is still a healthy, great place to live, and that our property values are protected. Merci, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And, again, I thank the Member for these questions. They're very important, and they have an impact on residents of Yellowknife. Updating environmental guidance is a standard practice as new data and increased scientific research is available.

I can assure residents of Yellowknife that the previous guidelines completed in 2003 or 2003 was protective of human health and the environment. ENR will ensure our guidelines continue to be protective of the human health and the environment while incorporating new science and data that becomes available to us. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.