

Addressing Local Concerns in the Development of the Whabouchi Mine Project

Context

The Whabouchi Mine Project is located 30 km east of the Cree community of Nemaska and 280 km north-west of the municipality of Chibougamau, in Northern Quebec. It lies entirely in the territory governed by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and therefore was subject to both the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) process led by the Review Committee COMEX, a Quebec-Cree bipartite agency charged with evaluating projects south of the 55th parallel North, and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA).

Nemaska Lithium plans to construct and operate the Whabouchi mine site, an open-pit and underground mine, for the production of a spodumene concentrate to be transformed into high-purity lithium hydroxide and carbonate for the lithium battery market in Shawinigan, Quebec. As part of the project's development, Nemaska Lithium initiated First Nations and public information sessions and discussions early in the exploration stage to give communities the opportunity to express their concerns and issues.

Description of Measures Implemented

In the first steps of project development, Nemaska Lithium worked in full compliance with industry standards for engagement and consultation. However, even though concerns were identified through the environmental and social assessments, they were not fully integrated into project design. This led to multiple concerns still being expressed by the local communities and individuals, as well as by the provincial and federal authorities when the initial version of the ESIA report was issued in 2013.

In light of the comments and concerns received, Nemaska Lithium decided to entirely reassess the technical design of its Whabouchi Mine Project as part of the framework of the Feasibility Study, and thus fully integrate communities' concerns and issues. The key changes examined in the Feasibility Study included the waste rock and tailings pile, and the location of the sedimentation basins and related final effluents (i.e., the project components of greatest concern for the Crees of Nemaska). While accounting for the many constraints prevailing on site, the principle objectives were as follows:

- Reduce the amount of mine infrastructure to be built;
- Concentrate infrastructure near the ore deposit; and
- Minimize the project's ecological footprint.



Lead: Industry (Que.)

Step of the Mineral Development Sequence: Exploration and development

Key Finding: By integrating community concerns into the Whabouchi Mine Project design, Nemaska Lithium has limited the project's potential impacts on local communities and individuals and helped optimize the project's technical, economic, environmental and social components.



Whabouchi Mine Site in 2011

Following the reassessment, Nemaska Lithium decided to completely review the location of all stockpiles, basins and effluents to ensure they were located far from the nearby lake. At the same time, other changes were made to the project to reduce wetland loss, to ensure only one final effluent, to reduce the visual impact associated with the waste rock and tailings pile for land users and neighbouring Cree camps, and to avoid any deviation of the existing roads.

Results

In total, changes made to the mine infrastructure layout in the Feasibility Study made it possible to avoid the loss of approximately 53 hectares of terrestrial and wetland environments. This reduced the direct impact of the project on these environments by 25 percent, in part because the infrastructure that will be required for the underground operations beginning in Year 21 will be located entirely within the boundaries of the open pit.

By incorporating the concerns and issues of local communities, Nemaska Lithium was able not only to minimize its impacts on the surrounding environment but also to form the basis for strong partnerships and relationships with the Crees of Nemaska.

Lessons Learned

In Canada, legal requirements associated with the development of mining projects stipulate that companies must inform and engage with the surrounding communities to ensure that their concerns and issues are taken into consideration. However, the development of the Whabouchi Mine Project has demonstrated that concerns should not only be identified and addressed as part of the ESIA process to meet requirements, but should also be shared with technical teams and be integrated into project design, limiting the potential impacts of the project on local communities and individuals. This enables the optimization of not only the project's technical and economic components but its environmental and social components as well.

Real partnerships between communities and a mineral company developed early in the exploration stage enables the establishment of greater certainty for a mining project and favours better community acceptance.

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