

Northern Saskatchewan Environmental Quality Committee

Context

The northern half of Saskatchewan is home to about 37 000 people, or 4 percent of the province’s population. They are mostly of Aboriginal heritage, living in 35 small municipalities and 35 reserve communities. The richest uranium ore deposits in the world are located in this region. Six uranium mine/mill projects are in operation in northern Saskatchewan, employing almost 4 000 workers at the sites.

The uranium mining industry in northern Saskatchewan underwent a major expansion in the 1990s. In response to the requests for approvals for five new mines proposed at that time, a series of public hearings were held by a Federal-Provincial Joint Review Panel. Northerners voiced their interest in the socio-economic benefits that would be derived from the operations and from participating in an environmental monitoring committee. The Government of Saskatchewan responded to the Panel’s initial report and recommendations by establishing the Northern Saskatchewan Environmental Quality Committee (NSEQC) initiative to engage Northerners in decisions concerning the development and operations of the uranium industry. The committee acts as a key communications bridge between the uranium industry and northern residents.

Description of Measures Implemented

Since 1995, authorization for the NSEQC program has been renewed every five years by a Government of Saskatchewan Order-In-Council. Membership consists of 78 primary and alternate community representatives. The Ministry of Government Relations provides an annual budget for members’ travel expenses, meeting facilities, and two staff positions. Uranium companies provide in-kind support for mine-site tours, workshops, and conferences.

The Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat (NMMS), established at the same time as the NSEQC, meets twice yearly. The NMMS has representatives from key provincial and federal ministries and agencies involved in the development and regulation of Saskatchewan’s uranium industry. It provides professional, administrative, and technical support to the NSEQC’s operations and regularly advertises members’ programs and services supporting the industry’s developments and operations.

Pre-exploration	Exploration	Development	Operation	Closure	Post-closure
Lead: Government (Sask.)					
Steps of the Mineral Development Sequence: Pre-exploration, exploration, development, operation, closure, post-closure					
Key Finding: By ensuring Northerners have a regular, formal means to address their concerns and provide input into decisions by companies and regulators, the NSEQC helps to build trust among Northerners, Saskatchewan’s uranium industry, and regulators, hence fostering community understanding of, and support for, mineral development activities.					



NSEQC touring the Cigar Lake project in northern Saskatchewan

The NSEQC's credibility in fulfilling its mandate is based on a number of design features. First, the NSEQC is an apolitical structure comprised of First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal representatives drawn from northern reserves and municipalities that are representative of the geographic region within which the uranium companies operate. Second, the communities' leadership nominates their NSEQC representatives, who are then appointed by Minister's Order for terms of up to two years.

In addition, accountability is built into the program: each five-year term concludes with a review of the program's current and future relevance and value to the industry, regulators, and northern communities.

Results

The NSEQC continues to grow and reinforce the relationship among industry, government regulators, and the people. This 19-year-old initiative continues to serve important functions, including helping to increase Northerners' (and the public's) understanding of the uranium industry and boost the attractiveness of the northern Saskatchewan investment platform. It also provides examples of the wide range of job opportunities available to youth and community members in both the mining and regulatory fields. From a regulatory perspective, the NSEQC helps regulators fulfill their responsibilities with informed public input into their decisions on northern uranium mines/mills projects.



McArthur River mine site in northern Saskatchewan

More than 300 Northerners have participated on the NSEQC since 1995. The NSEQC has helped increase their understanding of the industry and their appreciation of its opportunities and challenges by providing an opportunity to monitor uranium mining developments, regularly visit mine sites, and discuss uranium development with mining companies and regulators.

The NMMS provides an opportunity for regulatory officials from a number of ministries/agencies to come together to discuss industry operations, development plans, issues or trends affecting the industry, and its relations with Northerners, as well as the NSEQC's operations, priorities, and requirements.

Lessons Learned

By ensuring Northerners have a regular, formal means to address their concerns and provide input into decisions by companies and regulators, the NSEQC helps to build trust among Northerners, Saskatchewan's uranium industry, and regulators, hence fostering community understanding of, and support for, mineral development activities.

For more information:

Darren Thomas

Manager, Northern Saskatchewan Environmental Quality Committee

Northern Engagement Branch

Saskatchewan Ministry of Government Relations (gr.gov.sk.ca/)

Darren.Thomas@gov.sk.ca