

RELEASE

May 31, 2016

Grassy Narrows demands clean up of poisoned river

Government has had expert report for a month which finds that the river can be cleaned up safely

PRESS CONFERENCE: 9:30 a.m. today, 25 Cecil St. Steelworkers Hall.

SPEAKERS: Chief Simon Fobister Sr., Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, Judy Da Silva, David Suzuki Foundation – Faisal Moola, Amnesty International – Craig Benjamin.

Toronto – Grassy Narrows First Nations leaders, backed by the Ontario Regional Chief, Amnesty International, and David Suzuki Foundation are demanding that the government clean up the river that is the lifeblood of their community following an expert report finding that one of Canada's most notorious toxic dumping sites can be cleaned safely. Ontario had long denied that a clean up was possible or even necessary. Multiple generations of Grassy Narrows families suffer from the debilitating health impacts of mercury poisoning including loss of vision, imbalance, and trembling. Nothing has been done to clean the Wabigoon River in over 40 years since a paper mill dumped 9,000 kg of mercury, a potent neurotoxin, into the waterway that provides fish and water to Grassy Narrows First Nation and their neighbours.

"The mercury poison in our river must be cleaned up," said Chief Simon Fobister Sr. of Grassy Narrows. "We know that our river can be made safe. Are our lives worth less than others to the government?"

On Monday morning CBC reported that a spokesperson for the Ontario Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change responded to the report by email saying "[c]urrently there is no evidence to suggest that mercury levels in the river system are such that any remediation, beyond continuing natural recovery is warranted or advisable." The response follows word for word an earlier response by the Ministry from February 22nd, before the report was completed.

One meal of fish from Grassy Narrows' Clay Lake on the Wabigoon River contains up to 150 times the safe daily dose of mercury recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The river has shown little to no improvement in the last 30 years.

Fishing is a central part of Grassy Narrows' indigenous culture, sustenance, and identity.

“It is my hope and dream that our river will flow with life again so that our people can rebuild our way of life and our health that was taken from us by mercury,” said Grassy Narrows environmental health coordinator and grandmother Judy Da Silva. “We call on the government to clean our river so that no more Grassy Narrows children will be robbed of a bright future because of the poison that has been left in our river.”

The expert report to the mercury working group formed by Wynne following a 2012 commitment recommends a series of steps that would accelerate the recovery of the river and allow Grassy Narrows to safely practice a cultural and commercial fishery. The authors found that the government’s approach of natural remediation, which involves no action, is not viable and will leave the fish unsafe to eat for the foreseeable future.

Later on Monday Wynne backtracked her government’s position and said “if there is new science that shows that here is a way to clean up that water and to get that mercury out without causing more damage I would be thrilled, I would be thrilled to know that. I haven’t seen that information.”

The Canadian Press reported on Monday afternoon that Environment Minister Glen Murray says the government is taking the report very seriously, and if there is a safe way to clean up the mercury it will be done. “If there’s a solution there that’s feasible, then we should be looking at it and acting on it,” he said.

Studies by Japanese mercury experts over 35 years have diagnosed many Grassy Narrows people with Minamata Disease, or mercury poisoning, using standards applied in Japan. They have also found symptoms of mercury poisoning in the younger generation and called for a thorough investigation of congenital mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows – something that has never been done.

The new report released yesterday notes that the government has not monitored mercury levels in Wabigoon River water or sediment since the 1980s and that the official strategy of Monitored Natural Recovery has failed. It also says that monitoring of the decommissioned chemical plant in Dryden is not sufficient to rule out ongoing mercury leaks from the site of the dumping in the 60s.

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