

Newfoundland pushes ahead with Muskrat Falls project amid mass protests

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Despite longstanding and increasingly vocal opposition to the environmentally destructive and highly speculative Muskrat Falls hydro-electric dam project, the Newfoundland and Labrador government-owned Nalcor began flooding the reservoir for the dam last weekend.

Dwight Ball, the province's Liberal Premier, announced last Saturday that the government had given Nalco the go-ahead to begin flooding what will ultimately be a 41 square kilometer (16 square mile) reservoir. Nalcor engineers have argued they need to raise the water level in the reservoir to 25 meters now so as to prevent winter candle-ice from damaging dam infrastructure.

The Muskrat Fall project has been controversial since it was announced in 2012 by Danny Williams' provincial Progressive Conservative government and Stephen Harper's federal Conservative administration.

The focus of the most recent protests are well-founded concerns about the impact of mercury contamination on the local population, which is largely Inuit and Innu.

Studies have shown that flooding Muskrat Falls to create a dam reservoir without first clearing away all, or at least much, of the vegetation and top-soil will dramatically increase methylmercury levels in the water and food chain. This risks poisoning residents downstream in Mud Lake, Rigolet and Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB) who live off fish and other wildlife, like seals, that feed on fish.

Methylmercury, explains a recent Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) article, "forms in nature when bacteria reacts with mercury in water, soil or plants" and becomes increasingly concentrated and toxic as it moves up the food chain. At the top of the food chain, in fish and seals, the concentrations of

methylmercury will be "10 million times the concentration" found in the local water, explains Trevor Bell, a Memorial University professor who has studied the danger that methylmercury poses to the people leaving south of Muskrat Falls.

Nalcor and the government have long known that the flooding will raise methylmercury levels. But they have claimed the toxin will be rapidly washed into, and dissipated, in Lake Melville, the estuary below Muskrat Fall that is the Inuits' traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

However, scientific studies have shown the increased levels will persist for decades, putting the local population at severe risk of poisoning and/or the loss of their food supply.

A study by a team of Harvard researchers found that if, as the government and Nalcor propose, only some of the vegetation is cleared from the reservoir, methylmercury levels could rise by as much as 380 percent.

Despite the scientific studies and growing popular anger, Nalcor and the Liberal government continue to downplay the risk of contamination, or blithely declare, as did federal Liberal MP Nick Whalen, that it can be easily mitigated by providing "compensation" to the Inuit for the loss of their food source. Removing all the organic material, as the Harvard researchers recommended, was, they insisted, prohibitively expensive.

There are also concerns that the dam is being built on unstable ground. "It is a very uneasy feeling to be living near the Churchill River below Muskrat, let me tell you that much, HVGB resident Edward Mesher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I'm convinced this whole thing is about certain people profiting greatly from the construction contracts who really don't

understand the likely outcome or care about the people around here at all.”

As Nalcor moved to initiate flooding last month, a wave of protests erupted and continued for the better part of two weeks. Protesters, including native elders, occupied part of the Muskrat Falls worksite and picketed the main gate, succeeding in shutting the project down for several days, as workers expressed their solidarity. In a livestreamed appeal, the protesters said they didn’t want to put anyone out of a job, just protect their food and water.

In a further expression of the depth of the anger with the government and Nalcor, local mayors in Labrador said they would not allow Nalcor to transport equipment through their towns. There were also protests on the island of Newfoundland, including in Corner Brook and at the provincial legislature in Saint John’s.

Scores were arrested on contempt of court and trespass charges. The government has refused to drop these charges despite reaching a settlement on October 26 with the official native leadership—the Innu Nation, the Nunatsiavut Government and the NunatuKavut Community Council.

These government-backed organizations are dominated by the tiny, indigenous petty bourgeois elite, which has close ties to the political establishment in St. John’s. This elite is profiting from various business ventures associated with the Muskrat Fall development, including through the Nunatsiavut Group of Companies.

Under the October 26 agreement, the government claims that Nalcor will closely monitor methylmercury levels and will henceforth make all its decisions “using scientific-based research. This claim has already been belied by its insistence that it is too costly to remove all vegetation and top-soil from the reservoir.

At its unveiling, the Muskrat Falls development was trumpeted by the Williams Conservative government as a “green, clean and renewable” project that would provide a boost to Newfoundland’s economy, generating larger revenues through electricity exports to Nova Scotia and the northeastern US. However, the price of electricity has fallen, while project costs have soared. Initially budgeted at \$6.2 billion, the Muskrat Falls hydro-electric project is now expected to cost nearly double that, \$11.6 billion.

It is now widely conceded that Muskrat Falls is a boondoggle. But with so much money invested in the project and so much of the business elite having banked on profiting from it, there is no question of it being abandoned.

Instead the Newfoundland and Canadian ruling elite as a whole are preparing to place the burden for the cost overruns and profit shortfalls on the province’s population through electricity rate increases and further austerity.

Last month, as the protests erupted against the Muskrat Falls project, several provincial Liberal ministers joined Barry Perry, the CEO of Fortis, the St. John’s-based international power utility, in New York to celebrate Fortis’ launch on the New York Stock Exchange.

Newfoundland Premier Ball had himself been scheduled to join Perry in ringing the bell at the opening of NYSE trading on October 17, but according to press reports had to cancel.

While the people of Newfoundland and Labrador will bear the environmental and financial burdens of the Muskrat Falls project, Fortis, which owns the transmission lines by which the electricity the project generates is to be transported to markets in Newfoundland and beyond, expects to cash in, literally all the way to Wall Street.



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