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Sustaining Public Support for Uranium Mining in Saskatchewan

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It is a pleasure to once again attend this distinguished symposium and make a presentation on a topic very relevant to Saskatchewan – sustaining public support for our uranium industry. The uranium industry is very important to the province, as the only uranium-producing jurisdiction currently in Canada. Two years ago, I presented the message that the Province of Saskatchewan, with its vast uranium resources, will remain a long-term, major supplier of uranium to the world. Furthermore, I told you that the government encourages the development of those resources and supports the growth of the uranium mining industry. This message has not changed.

What I want to speak about today are some of Saskatchewan's initiatives that have developed and sustained a very pro-uranium attitude. As many of you are aware, government positions tend to reflect the wishes of their constituents. The long-term, consistent message of the government in advocating development of the province's uranium resources reflects the high level of public support for the uranium mining industry.

There are, I believe, a number of unique initiatives in place in Saskatchewan that promote engagement between the uranium industry, the government and the public that reassure people of the safety of the industry and provide a high level of socio-economic benefits to local communities. These initiatives include:

- Worker Health and Safety Committees;
- Environmental Quality Committees;
- industry-community-government co-operation; and
- consultations on socio-economic initiatives.

While these engagement activities are important, equally important is the performance of the industry in protecting workers and the environment. Without a track record of safe operations as a basis for communications, the ability to work with local communities is severely hindered.

In my presentation today, I will briefly examine some of Saskatchewan's experiences with these initiatives and hope that you will find some ideas that may be effective for your own jurisdiction.

I first want to inform you about the strong environmental and worker health performance of the industry in Saskatchewan. The uranium mining industry has an outstanding track record in the protection of worker health and safety and in the protection of the environment in Saskatchewan.

Uranium mines operated by Cameco Corporation and Cogema Resources, a subsidiary of the AREVA group of companies, have received local and national awards in environmental performance and in worker health and safety. The companies are mining the richest uranium deposits in the world, but the average radiation exposure of their mine site workers is only a fraction of the allowable exposure. In terms of conventional worker health and safety, Saskatchewan uranium mines have among the lowest accident frequency of any mining operation in Canada and are considerably lower than other industrial activities. With both Cameco and Cogema winning annual national mine safety awards, I sometimes wonder if these two companies aren't competing with themselves to see who will win it in any given year.

Part of the success of the companies in achieving these high standards can be attributed to the Worker Health and Safety Committees that are in place at each of the mines. These committees, made up of mine site employees, have input to the companies and the government regulators. They not only provide an independent monitoring programme for safety practices at the site, but they also interact in the development of safe practice procedures instituted by the company and further monitored by government regulators.

In environmental protection, the companies are doing an equally good job. They have achieved exceptional levels of environmental performance despite operating in markets where we have recently seen some of the lowest-ever prices for their product. Critical environmental controls involve two or three levels of protection and the companies utilize state-of-the-art effluent treatment and tailings management facilities. Similar to the level of protection afforded their employees, the releases of treated water to the pristine northern environment contain only a fraction of the levels of contaminants permitted under Saskatchewan's Surface Water Quality Guidelines.

However, without an effective mechanism to engage the general population and locally impacted communities in the environmental programmes, it would be easy for misinformation on the impact of uranium mining operations to spread. The consequences of such misinformation, whether deliberate or not, cannot be underestimated. A strong public sentiment against uranium mining or the nuclear industry can result in irrational and unexpected decisions that hurt investment and confidence in the future of the industry in that jurisdiction.

The need for an effective, tripartite engagement mechanism between the uranium mining industry, the residents of impact communities, and the government was identified as part of the environmental review of the new mines that occurred in the mid-to-late 1990s in Saskatchewan. As a result, the Province of Saskatchewan established the Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat and associated Environmental Quality Committees, also called EQCs. Three EQCs represent the regional distribution of mines in the north. Each impact community in a region nominates a representative to participate on the EQC for that region. The

Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat, in turn, is staffed full-time by one government official, but also includes representatives from key provincial and federal agencies involved in regulating the uranium mining industry. The function of the Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat is to provide support and technical education to the EQCs.

EQCs review, participate in and provide comments on the environmental monitoring programmes operated by the mines and regulated by the province, including both the ongoing mine-specific monitoring programmes and regional cumulative effects studies. The EQCs do not have the final say on the design of monitoring programmes or in regulatory decisions. However, mining companies and government regulators take their advice very seriously. EQC members often accompany officials from the Saskatchewan Environment Department or Labour Department on mine site monitoring programmes and often participate in environmental sample collection programmes. EQCs also review the design of monitoring programmes and have made suggestions to change sampling locations based on their traditional knowledge of the land. The province and mining companies have incorporated these suggestions into their environmental programmes.

The EQCs have another important function: communicating environmental and worker health and safety information to their communities, and bringing concerns from the communities to government officials or company representatives to be addressed. EQCs are an effective bridge between local communities and the uranium mine operations. For example, a few years ago, an EQC sent representatives to a regulatory hearing in Ottawa held by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. The representatives provided an intervention in the hearing to support the proposed monitoring programme of the mining company. This support was based on:

- understanding the extent of the potential environmental impacts;
- understanding of the environmental monitoring programme;
- confidence in the company's control measures;
- confidence in the company's ability to address potential problems; and
- confidence in the company's desire to minimize the environmental impacts of their operation.

How many here in the audience today would like to have independent public groups supporting the design and operation of your environmental programmes at nuclear facilities?

Tripartite engagement mechanisms involving consultation and innovative programmes do not end with environmental monitoring processes in Saskatchewan. Directing socio-economic benefits associated with the mining industry to local communities is also recognized as a key component to building public support. Cameco Corporation and Cogema Resources recognized the importance of directing these benefits to northern communities early in the development of the uranium mining industry. This support, from the highest levels of the companies, was crucial to the subsequent success of the programmes.

However, as with environmental programmes, it is critical to be able to deliver on commitments made in the engagement process.

In order to properly present the programmes and to give you some idea of the extent of their success, I will first digress a bit and give you some understanding of the challenges facing northern Saskatchewan.

- Until fairly recently, the economy of northern Saskatchewan was largely based on traditional occupations such as hunting, fishing and trapping, with some activity in the forestry sector.
- There are only about 35 000 people in northern Saskatchewan, an area that comprises one-half the area of the province.
- In contrast to the rest of the province, the population is young with 46 per cent under 20 years of age. This percentage is increasing – 24 per cent growth since the early 1980s. People of Aboriginal descent make up 81 per cent of the population as compared to 11 per cent on a provincial basis.
- Education levels in the north are much lower than the rest of the province with 30 per cent of the northern population achieving less than grade nine, compared with 13 per cent for the province as a whole.
- Many northern communities lack the infrastructure to create jobs for their citizens.
- 45 per cent of adults – those more than 15 years old – have dropped out of the labour force and the remaining 55 per cent that are working or looking for work face unemployment rates three times higher than the provincial average. For those employed, the majority of jobs are seasonal or part-time in nature, with incomes significantly less than the average provincial income.
- In the north, 34 per cent of private households are classified as low income, compared to 18 per cent provincially.

All these statistics serve to illustrate the desperate need for employment and business opportunities in northern Saskatchewan and the challenges that businesses, including the uranium mining industry, must overcome in order to meet the expectations of the local population seeking employment opportunities.

An important change that occurred at Saskatchewan uranium mines, and one that contributes to the success of the engagement activities, is the use of fly-in/fly-out work arrangements at the mines. Cameco and Cogema have realized a number of benefits from this operational structure.

- It avoids the social disruptions associated with mine closures and the negative perceptions that may be attached to a mining company as a result.
- It promotes participation by people of Aboriginal descent by allowing employees to integrate traditional lifestyles with participation in the wage economy.
- It allows the companies to direct benefits to a number of northern communities, helping to create a positive perception of the industry.
- It keeps employees returning and residing in their home communities where they can carry on their traditional lifestyle and communicate what companies are doing for mine safety and environmental protection.

- Employees with higher incomes and training often serve as role models within their local communities, increasing the motivation of others to pursue opportunities in the mining industry.

However, the activities did not stop there. Companies and governments recognized the existing educational barriers to mine employment. Mining job stereotypes, depicted as manual labour with dirty picks and shovels, are no longer valid. Today, even the most basic occupations in a mine operate complex, expensive equipment that requires a high level of education and skill.

In order to begin to address the education shortfall and promote participation by residents of northern Saskatchewan in the mining industry, the Government of Saskatchewan engaged communities and industry to create the Northern Labour Market Committee. The Committee brings together community representatives, Aboriginal groups, training institutions and industry to co-ordinate training with employment opportunities.

One of the most successful initiatives developed through the close co-operation of this group, is the Multi-Party Training Plan. The plan links the anticipated future employment needs at all uranium mines and the timing of those needs with the training requirements for those occupations. It also incorporates an associated adult basic education programme. The Plan allows these groups to schedule training programmes for successful participants to move directly to employment at the mines. Individual communities are also involved in the programme. They are given the responsibility to identify potential candidates for the training programmes. Close communication between all parties is essential for the plan to operate. This level of engagement also serves a secondary function of educating community leaders about the requirements necessary to work at a mine and mine operations in general.

The Multi-Party Training Plan was an outstanding success. The Plan was jointly funded by the federal and provincial governments and the uranium mining industry. It operated from 1993 to 1998. During the five-year period it met and exceeded all its goals before the fifth year. Near the end of its operation, an independent review of the Plan was undertaken. The review confirmed its success and suggested that the Plan be used as a model for training programmes across the province. In addition, the Plan has been closely examined by other jurisdictions within Canada and a number of international jurisdictions. Based on its success, Phase II of the plan was developed and is currently under way.

Through these examples, you may begin to recognize a pattern of how our tripartite engagement mechanisms are structured. Rather than holding intermittent public meetings as a particular issue arises and responding to an audience that has little or no understanding of the industry, the initiatives developed in Saskatchewan are long-term processes. They tend to be focussed on specific activities of the uranium mine operation to allow groups participating in the process to develop technical expertise. These engagement initiatives, therefore, have both learning and buy-in components.

By involving communities or designated community members in the design and operation of environmental monitoring programmes and developing training

opportunities in close co-operation with local communities, key individuals in the community become empowered. They observe their influence on mine operations, they understand the good environmental performance of the mine and can measure real progress in attracting socio-economic benefits to the community and region. By empowering these individuals, the industry ensures that the messages of environmental stewardship and community benefits are, in part, delivered by local, trusted individuals. Furthermore, these individuals now have the skills to critically evaluate outside communication exercises by non-governmental organizations, governments or companies and respond knowledgeably.

However, in providing these experiences and approaches to tripartite engagement processes to you today, I want to express a note of caution. In taking this approach, governments and industry must be very realistic and candid in establishing the programmes and their objectives. They must also make sure that participants understand the limits placed on their powers, and only put in place what can reasonably be delivered. Under this type of approach, it is very easy for expectations to exceed reality, setting up your target audience for disappointment and eventually cynicism. In addition, it requires an ongoing commitment to maintain and build on the relationships you have developed with the local communities. In our experience, it is important for the communities and individuals to see that they have access to the highest levels of the industry and that concern for their issues begins at this level of the companies. Both Bernard Michel, Chair and CEO of Cameco Corporation and Tim Gitzel, President of Cogema Resources, regularly take the time to visit impacted communities and respond to public concerns.

In making this presentation to you today, I am not saying that you should copy Saskatchewan's programmes in your own jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction will face unique opportunities and obstacles. Rather, I would ask you to consider our experiences and then work to develop your own unique structures and initiatives that are tailored to your culture and businesses.

Thank you for this opportunity and I would be pleased to try to respond to any questions you might have.