

Governments announce new initiatives for Sydney's tar ponds

BY ALEX BUSTOS

Ottawa (CUP) — Nearly a decade after the Sydney Steel mill closed its coke ovens, politicians and activists are still looking for ways to clean up the mill's legacy: it is perhaps the worst environmental disaster in Canadian history.

A century's worth of steel manufacturing has scarred the city on Cape Breton Island with an estimated 700,000 tonnes of toxic waste. This is several times more waste than was present at the once-infamous Love Canal in New York State.

For decades, the Sydney Steel mill coke ovens dumped pollutants into the Muggah Creek Watershed, which runs through part of the city and flows into the town's harbour. The coke ovens closed in 1988, but the environmental catastrophe they caused remains.

"The whole city is exposed to higher levels of chemicals because of the tar ponds," says Elizabeth May, executive director of the Sierra Club.

Many of the chemicals in the Tar Ponds are considered carcinogens. Estimates of the number of people with cancer in Sydney vary. Some reports, however, have

put the cancer rate in the city as the highest in Canada, twice the national average.

Federal Environment Minister Sergio Marchi says he's disgusted with the entire affair.

"I think it's a national issue and, quite frankly, a bit of a national shame," said Marchi, who visited the tar pods last August.

After Marchi visited the tar ponds this past summer, the first visit ever by a federal environment minister, a grassroots group was formed to make recommendations to deal with the problem.

The Joint Action Group (JAG), composed of members of the community, is working on solutions to the tar ponds problem. Late last month, JAG met with politicians at all levels of government, including Marchi (in his second visit to the tar ponds), Federal Health Minister Dave Dingwall and Don Downe, Nova Scotia Minister of Transportation and Public Works.

The meeting ended with the announcement that \$1.67 million will be provided to support a number of JAG initiatives. Among the projects to be funded are a \$100,000 grant to pre-design a sewer collector system to reduce the amount of raw sewage entering Muggah Creek and a \$25,000

fund to help update the Cancer Registry for the years 1965-1995.

The cost will be shared by all three levels of government.

This is not the first time the federal and provincial governments have attempted to clean up Sydney's tar ponds.

A previous attempt ended in a \$56 million fiasco. In the mid-1980s, the federal and provincial government established a committee to clean up the tar ponds. In 1987, Acres International Ltd. was awarded a contract to clean up the site. In 1989, Superburn Joint Venture was awarded a contract to build fluidized bed incinerators to burn the toxic waste. The result of all this effort was a mammoth engineering screw-up.

Bruno Marcocchio, a Sydney environmentalist and JAG member, says the incinerator was improperly built. In order to burn the toxic waste, which contains polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), the temperature would have to be kept at 1300 C. The incinerator, however, couldn't burn at levels higher than 900 C, says Marcocchio. As a result, the incinerator wouldn't have eliminated the toxins, but rather spread them through the air.

To make matters worse, the internal plumbing system designed to transport the sludge to the incinerator was inadequate. The failure drove the federal government to abandon the project in 1992, leaving the provincial government to solve the problem.

In the fall of 1994, the provincial government assumed control of the project from Acres and Superburn. In 1996, the Nova Scotia government suggested burying the toxins, a suggestion that was widely rejected. Years of failure, says Marcocchio, has left a bitter taste in the community's mouth.

"The cynicism with the provincial government is well held considering the contempt for human life," he says.

But Chris Welner, spokesperson for the Nova Scotia Ministry of Transportation and Public Works, the office responsible for the tar ponds clean-up, says it's unfair to lay blame on the province.

"To point the finger and say the provincial government hasn't managed this properly is a very simplistic answer," says Welner.

Welner denies the incinerator was built improperly. The facility, he says, was never designed to burn PCBs but PAHs. At the time of the incinerator proposal peo-

ple weren't aware of the high level of PCBs in the tar ponds.

"The incinerator worked fine, dare I say. It's just that the pipes couldn't deliver materials to burn," says Welner.

The provincial government wants to solve the tar pond issue, continues Welner. That, he says, is why they are working with JAG and other levels of government to solve the problem.

"[The tar ponds are] Canada's number one problem. The only way it will be solved is with a process through the community, with help from government."

Years of bungling has lowered the optimism of some Sydney residents. "The comment I hear most is that it's shameful \$56 million were [wasted], someone should be held accountable, and something should be done about it," says Mayor John Coady of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality.

But looking for someone to blame, says Minister Marchi, is counterproductive.

"When you roll back the clock, everyone in Sydney and all levels of government wanted the jobs at the steel mill," he says. "When you look at the cancer rates in and around Sydney, that should be enough for anyone to say, 'Forget whose fault it was.'"

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