

Oral Questions

contrary, this morning the Premier of Ontario talked about technological development in connection with high speed trains. We agree with that, provided we do not support services that are scarcely used today by Quebecers and other Canadians.

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[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Ray Funk (Prince Albert—Churchill River): Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources as the minister responsible for the Atomic Energy Control Board of Canada. At 12.45 p.m. last Tuesday, Cameco Corporation reported a spill of 440,000 gallons of untreated mine water containing arsenic and radium 226 from its Rabbit Lake mine in northern Saskatchewan.

I understand that preliminary tests indicate that the danger is presently contained but some serious questions need to be answered. Why did a spill of this magnitude go unreported for 11 hours, even when the monitoring equipment was functioning? Is this spill related to the layoff of 96 workers since June in preparation for privatization? Were Atomic Energy Control Board personnel on the scene at the time this was happening and what was their role? And will the minister immediately call a public inquiry to look into what looks like a total breakdown of the nuclear regulatory system?

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for asking the question. We have been examining the matter at the Collins Bay mine, located near Rabbit Lake, Saskatchewan, very carefully. The first point I would like to make to the hon. member is that the Collins Bay mine had been shut down for approximately three months. Pumping was taking place so that the mine would not be flooded. Second, the water in question is primarily seepage and rainwater. The AECB has a person on site.

The only thing the hon. member said in his question that is at variance with the information I have received is

that the monitoring system was functioning. The information that I have received is that it was not functioning and that is part of the question the AECB is trying to determine.

As to the level of arsenic, nickel and the radioactive materials, the information that he had in his question, namely that preliminary studies show that it is well within the Saskatchewan limits, has been given to me today, but obviously I want more questions answered with respect to this issue.

Mr. Funk: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his answer. As he knows, there is a real question as to whether those limits in fact are safe in this day and age, knowing what we do.

My supplementary question is to the same minister. As he knows, this water is now in Wollaston Lake. Twelve hundred people depend on Wollaston Lake for their food, their livelihood and their drinking water. Why were these people not informed immediately? Why did Ed Benoanie, the chief, not get a straight answer until 20 hours after the spill was discovered, 18 hours after he flew over the site, and 14 hours after he phoned the mine for information? Was it the recommendation of the AECB personnel on the site that the chief be stonewalled?

Mr. Epp: Mr. Speaker, in response to that second question I will refer my friend to the last part of my answer. I cannot answer the allegation that was in the question. My position as minister is that AECB in fact discovered the leakage. As I said, the information I received was that the monitoring system was not working for between 15 and 17 hours. At the present time AECB is on site.

We have met with company officials and the province of Saskatchewan. The Minister of the Environment and I have discussed this issue today as well. We want answers for what has happened. We want that fully aired, fully investigated. I am sure my colleague, the Minister of the Environment, and I would be very interested, not only in having that information but in making it public to assure people what happened, what the danger level, if any, was, and how it can be corrected in order that we do not have the incident repeated.