

Adjournment Debate

a fully public inquiry where everybody knows what is going on.

My specific question today in that regard is the following. When we met with the minister he said he would make a judgment on whether there should be an inquiry or not once he had the results of his internal investigation. I was wondering if the parliamentary secretary would be in a position today to tell us when that internal inquiry might be done so we could hear from the minister if in fact we will get our public inquiry.

• (1815)

Mr. John A. MacDougall (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources): Madam Speaker, on November 7, 1989 at 12.45 p.m. a mine water spill was discovered near the Collins Bay mine located at Rabbit Lake, Saskatchewan.

This open pit mine, which is owned and operated by Cameco, has been shut down for approximately three months due, in part, to the depressed nature of the uranium market. This temporary mine closure led to the lay-off of 96 mine workers earlier this year. In order to prevent the pit from flooding, water which naturally seeps into the pit is routinely pumped along a pipeline from the mine site to the mill, which is several kilometres away. A valve housing the pipeline cracked and allowed 2,000 cubic metres of mine water to spill out into an overflow catchment, then into Collins Creek, and finally into Wollaston Lake.

Because the mine had been shut down, the spill water was essentially rain water which had seeped into the pit. Extensive sampling of water in Collins Creek has shown that the radium, nickel and arsenic levels are extremely low and meet Saskatchewan surface water quality objectives. At the outflow of Collins Bay into Wollaston Lake, the level of these contaminants is below detection levels. Hence, the present data clearly indicates that the spill did not endanger the drinking water or the fisheries that exist in Wollaston Lake.

The minister has indicated that he wants answers as to why the spill occurred, and wants the whole question fully aired and fully investigated. He has also indicated that he will be following the AECB investigation with considerable interest and wishes to be kept fully informed of new developments as they occur.

The Atomic Energy Control Board, which is the independent federal regulatory agency responsible for health, safety and environmental issues related to the nuclear industry, is continuing its investigation into this incident. The spill was discovered from an aircraft chartered by AECB during a routine inspection of the site and also observed independently by Chief Benoanie of the Hatchet Lake Band. The AECB inspector investigated the spill immediately upon landing and remained on the site to complete a full investigation. The results of the ongoing investigation have been submitted to the board.

While the preliminary stages of the investigation are under way, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources wrote on November 22 to Chief Benoanie of the Hatchet Lake Band at Wollaston Lake and assured him that the spill had created little environmental damage and that he would be kept fully informed of any new developments.

On November 24, the minister met with Chief Benoanie and the hon. member from Prince Albert—Churchill to discuss the issue. He assured both of them that the AECB will keep all interested parties informed about developments as they occur.

As you are aware, Madam Speaker, yesterday, December 6, the Atomic Energy Control Board recommended to the Attorney General of Canada that they consider laying charges against Cameco regarding alleged violations of the Atomic Energy Control Act. This new phase of the investigation will involve the prosecuting counsel for the Attorney General of Canada's office. The office has the responsibility to make the final decision on the specific charge to be laid against the company. The first meeting to view the legal implications of the case will be held later this month.

Today the Saskatchewan government announced that it is taking a separate but similar action. It has referred the investigation to the Saskatchewan Justice to determine if sufficient evidence exists to lay charges under the Saskatchewan Environmental Management and Protection Act.

We expect that the investigation and the question of legal charges will be cleared up some time early in the new year. It is at that time that we will have the necessary information to make decisions about appropriate follow-up actions to this incident.