

OPINION-EDITORIAL

HEALTH AND SAFETY TOP PRIORITIES AT MACKENZIE MILL

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Forests and Range Minister
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I want you to know that the health and safety of local residents and mill employees is the Province's highest priority, which is why we have been monitoring the situation since Worthington Mackenzie Inc. announced plans last year to proceed with a warm shutdown of the Mackenzie kraft pulp mill.

On February 13, I toured the mill and was impressed by the professionalism of the management and union employees. I left feeling confident that despite the difficult working conditions, their priority was to safeguard the residents of Mackenzie.

That confidence was borne out this past weekend with the quick response of experienced mill employees to repair a leaking valve on one of the chlorine dioxide holding tanks. The co-operation and goodwill of these employees has been critical to ensuring the safety of the mill, environment and nearby residents. I also want to thank the residents of Mackenzie for their patience as the Province deals with the circumstances at the mill.

In October 2008, the Ministry of Environment issued an order requiring submission of information to assist the ministry in assessing environmental issues at the site. Worthington Mackenzie submitted the necessary information within the required time frame. Of the environmental issues identified at the site, foremost was the presence of a significant amount of chlorine dioxide (ClO₂), a chemical used in the bleaching process for pulp. Ongoing storage of this chemical, along with other chemicals, requires heating of the facility during colder months to prevent freezing of the associated works and accidental escape of chemicals.

On January 23, the Ministry of Environment issued a spill prevention order, ordering the company to ensure sufficient numbers of properly trained and qualified staff remained on-site at all times to maintain security, and monitoring and equipment operations in accordance with legislative and permit requirements.

When it became clear that the owner of the mill would not meet the requirements of the spill prevention order, the Ministry took decisive action to ensure health, safety and environmental risks were addressed immediately. It issued a declaration under the Environmental Management Act on January 25, declaring a potential environmental emergency at the site.

The Environmental Management Act allows the declaration of an environmental emergency when immediate action is necessary to prevent, lessen or control any hazard that the emergency presents to public health, safety or the environment. Through this action, the B.C. government was able to provide local provincial staff the ability to direct the deployment of labour, services, materials, equipment and other supports in response to the situation.

With the expiry of the original 15-day declaration, the Province moved to other actions under the Environmental Management Act, which authorizes the Province, or persons acting on behalf of government, to carry out actions to avoid the threat of a spill. Right now the mill is being maintained in a warm shutdown mode and this status will likely continue for the near future while options to lower the risk to human health, safety and the environment are developed. The Province has retained Mackenzie Pulpmill Environmental Management Inc., who has hired existing mill employees to provide the necessary management and labour to continue the warm shutdown. It is expected to cost approximately \$1 million per month to maintain the warm shutdown.

Recently, it has been reported that the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission has ordered the removal of the mill's 28 nuclear measuring devices, in part because the new owner had not obtained the required licence. These devices are used for purposes such as measuring pulp density and are common to pulp mills and other industrial applications. The Province understands the concern of the union that by removing these measuring devices, it may not be in the best interest of the mill and its future. For this reason the Province has been working with the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission and the deadline for removal of the nuclear devices was delayed to March 30, on condition that an application for a new license is filed by March 5. We've also arranged for employee training in the safe handling and storage of these devices.

As your readers may know, a number of mill workers have been working on-site without regular pay, helping provincial officials maintain a warm shutdown mode for the past few weeks. The Province has provided one payroll to these workers; however, they, like so many of us, are used to being paid every two weeks. We want to thank the employees for their patience. We're close to resolving the last few administrative and contractual issues so that employees can expect a more regular payroll process moving forward.

The Province has acted to deal with an environmental emergency but has no intention to take over the normal running of the mill. The Province will continue to identify options for both the immediate management of public health, safety and environmental risks, as well as a longer term plan to achieve stability at the site.

Let us be clear – it is our government's expectation that all companies in B.C. operate within the regulations and requirements that have been set out to protect public health, safety and the environment. As the mill owners have not met their responsibility to the people of British Columbia, we will hold them to account by seeking to fully recover any costs associated with our intervention.