

Monday, December 14, 2009

A “Free for All” as Mining Claims More than Double in Carbon-rich Ecosystem

Public Interest Groups Call for Land Withdrawals to Ease Pressure

TORONTO – A rapid increase in exploratory mining activities, including staking, drilling and clearance of vegetation in the heart of Ontario’s northern Boreal Forest, one of the world’s most carbon-rich ecosystems, has become a “Wild West” free for all, warn public interest groups. CPAWS Wildlands League, Ecojustice and Mining Watch Canada are concerned that development in an area known in the industry as the ‘Ring of Fire’ in Ontario’s Far North is exploding due to inadequate control under an antiquated *Mining Act*.

The groups have learned that in the last two years the number of active mining claims has more than doubled in Ontario’s Far North. As of December, there are over 8,200 claims, compared to 4,000 in October of 2007.

“Right now, mining activities are superseding the protection of ecological and cultural values. There is very little government oversight, no environmental assessment process, and no mechanism for First Nation control,” says Anna Baggio of CPAWS Wildlands League. The groups are worried that because claims and leases will be grandfathered into any land use planning processes, local First Nations communities will have little room to manoeuvre. They are also concerned that efforts to protect globally significant, carbon rich bogs and forests, intact watersheds and endangered species’ habitat will be undermined.

The ‘Ring of Fire’ is considered one of the largest potential mineral reserves in Ontario located 240 km west of James Bay. By some estimates, it covers more than 1.5 million ha. Over 35 junior and intermediate mining and exploration companies are now active here, making it the recent hotbed of Wild West mining activity in the Far North.

The groups are concerned that the mining exploration activities are causing the following problems:

- Inadequate waste management, garbage disposal and fuel spills in several mineral exploration camps;
- Polluting of nearby lakes and wetlands;
- Inappropriate and possibly illegal use of mining claims to map out two competing railway routes; and,
- Increased danger for species at risk like woodland caribou wolverine that need large intact areas of Boreal Forest to survive.

“We are hearing reports of 200 fuel drums sinking into the wetlands because they were placed clumsily on bog mats. Who will be responsible for cleaning up and restoring these lakes and wetlands?” adds Baggio.

“There is a complete lack of legal rules guiding activity in the Ring of Fire,” said Ecojustice Staff Lawyer Justin Duncan. “First Nations need to lead land use planning over the whole area and rules need to be established to manage development, otherwise the heart of Ontario’s northern boreal could be severely impacted and First Nations will bear the brunt of any long-term harm.”

MiningWatch Canada’s, Program Coordinator, Ramsey Hart says that “the impact of mining activity in this region will have a legacy that will last hundreds of years into the future and there is the potential for irrevocable harm. We have this opportunity, at this juncture, to do it right, with proper planning, environmental controls, and consent and accommodation of First Nations. This is an opportunity we can’t afford to lose”.

The groups want Ontario to immediately withdraw lands in the watersheds affected by the Ring of Fire exploration projects (outside of the areas already ‘claimed’) so that First Nations can work with the government to create a coordinated, regional land use plan and gain control over the implementation of industrial activities. This would minimize negative environmental impacts, protect the public interest, help prevent conflicts and ensure meaningful long term benefits to the people that live there, the groups add.

--30 --

For further information please contact:

Anna Baggio, Director Conservation Land Use Planning, Wildlands League
Justin Duncan, Staff Lawyer, Ecojustice
Ramsey Hart, Canada Program Coordinator, MiningWatch Canada

(416) 453-3285
(416) 368-7533, ext.22
(613) 569-3439