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Government asks for more study of Fundy Gypsum proposal

BY JENNIFER HOEGG

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Fundy Gypsum needs to answer a few more questions before the Department of Environment and Labour will approve its request for an expanded quarry on the Avon Peninsula.

In an environmental assessment decision announced March 17, Environment and Labour Minister Kings North MLA Mark Parent requested that CGC Inc.-Fundy Gypsum provide a focus report on several elements of their proposal.

Parent said in a phone interview that, despite the 750-plus pages of the company's submission, he did not have enough information to approve or reject the proposed mine extension. "We ask for a focus report when we don't have enough info on whether it would be environmentally safe to go ahead. When I don't have enough information, I can't decide one way or the other."

The Minister will request more information on potential impacts on species at risk, wetlands, surface and groundwater and fish habitat. The presence of several at-risk and one endangered plant species are of concern, he said. In Parent's response to Fundy Gypsum, the possibility of a federal environmental assessment is noted should fish habitat be found in Shaw Brook.

In response to concerns about the objectivity of documents prepared by the proponent company, Parent said his staff carefully reviews all submissions. "We examine every piece of information that comes in and put it through a very thorough screening."

Under the Province's environmental assessment regulations, Parent has 25 days to provide Fundy Gypsum with terms of reference for the focus report. The company will have a year to submit documentation. A 30-day public consultation period and time for departmental consideration will follow. At the end of the process, the Minister can approve, reject or call for full environmental assessment.

Company spokesperson Mike Bishop said Fundy Gypsum is "more than happy to comply" with the Minister's request and is waiting to see the terms of reference. "Once we have those in front of us, we'll be able to put together a plan to acquire that information."

Fundy Gypsum is "well aware of the plant species at risk," Bishop added, and has put forward plans to accommodate rare plants.

Bishop was unable to say yet whether the additional study will impact on the project's start time. Initially, the company planned to begin work at the site this year, but gypsum extraction would not begin until 2012.

Responding to the decision, Avon Peninsula Watershed Protection Society (APWPS) president Raymond Parker said he has mixed feelings. "It's certainly a significant decision; we're pleased that the minister has realized the proposal is deficient. On the other hand, the minister has assured us in writing that socio-economic factors would be part of the EA, so we're surprised and disappointed that his decision doesn't mention concerns in this respect."

Parker also expressed dismay that health concerns and sustainable development were not mentioned in the decision.

APWPS members will be following the focus report process closely, Parker said. "This little peninsula that we live on is still very much at risk."

Fundy Gypsum registered for a Class One environmental assessment of a 410-hectare surface mine adjacent to its current operations in Hants County in February. Registration documents and the Minister's decision are available at www.gov.ns.ca/enla/ea/projects.asp.

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