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For immediate release

PRAIRIE CREEK MINE: CYANIDE DISASTER WAITING TO ENGULF DEHCHO

FORT LIARD, NWT -- There are 40 tonnes of lethal cyanide that have been stored for over 20 years beside Prairie Creek, a tributary of the South Nahanni River in Dehcho First Nations territory, and the federal government must remove it.

The Winter Leadership meeting of the Dehcho First Nations (DFN), meeting here last week, unanimously called on the federal government to remove the cyanide before it contaminates the South Nahanni River, and damages beyond recovery the pristine waters and lands of one of Canada's most famous national parks, the Nahanni National Park Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The cyanide, along with deteriorating fuel tanks, mining infrastructure and a tailings pond are owned by a junior mining company, Canadian Zinc Corporation of Vancouver, who bought the never-operated Prairie Creek Mine in 1991. The mine itself was started in 1982 as part of an ill-fated attempt by Texans to corner the then booming silver market. When the price plummeted, however, the mine closed without ever removing a shovelful of ore.

But it left behind a dangerous legacy that sits decaying on Dehcho land. Canadian Zinc, which owns the mine and all the remains of the Prairie Creek infrastructure, wants to reopen the mine, speculating on higher silver and zinc prices today. Other mineral exploration companies are greedily eying the area.

The Dehcho and Parks Canada have identified mining activity, including the Prairie Creek mine, as "the greatest threat to the ecological integrity of the South Nahanni watershed", which includes Nahanni National Park Reserve.

The Dehcho leadership have called on government to remove the cyanide and other toxic materials for a number of years to no avail, despite the fact that DFN and Parks Canada have signed an interim agreement to withdraw 70,000 sq kms from mineral development and are working towards a final agreement to expand Nahanni National Park to better protect the ecologically sensitive South Nahanni Watershed. The nearby Dehcho community of Nahanni Butte and DFN have been at loggerheads with government over the Prairie Creek mine

and cyanide for some time, challenging various regulatory authorities as well as Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC). The Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board said the cyanide should be removed, and included measures in CZN's permits to make the company properly store the cyanide in an enclosed container until it could be removed or neutralized. But it is so highly toxic, that even government field inspectors said they would refuse to go near the location, and the measure has never been enforced.

In 2006, Nahanni Butte wrote to INAC Minister Jim Prentice requesting the cyanide be neutralized on site and removed. The minister – in the days before the Conservative Party became green – refused, saying the mine site was safe and the cyanide safely stored. The Dehcho disagree, as the cyanide is stored out in the open environment, in aging barrels that sit on wooden skids, and are only covered by tarps. “If there is an environmental disaster then it will be on his head,” Grand Chief Herb Norwegian said.

In January of this year Nahanni Butte raised the cyanide issue again since Canadian Zinc has proposed to build a 170 km. road to re-supply fuel and other contaminants to the mine site. Alarmingly, Canadian Zinc also proposes to haul the highly toxic cyanide out through the heart of the South Nahanni Watershed, over the mountains, through the karst lands, and overwater bodies to the Liard highway. There is great anxiety among residents that the “cyanide removal” proposal is being used as a political lever to try and gain support for the “Zinc Road.”

Back in Fort Liard at the leadership meeting, Marie Lafferty, president of the Fort Simpson Metis Local and Chief Eric Betsaka of Nahanni Butte First Nations argued that INAC has ignored the pleas of DFN's Annual Assemblies, and urgently asked DFN's leadership to keep pressing the federal government to take immediate action on the cyanide, calling it “a pending environmental disaster.”

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