

'Serious concern' among Nunavut communities over iron ore mine's proposed expansion

Emma Tranter / The Canadian Press
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*The Mary River mine sits about 150 kilometres south of Pond Inlet, Nunavut, as shown in this undated handout image. Inuit are speaking out against the proposed expansion of an open-pit iron ore mine that would include construction of a railroad, and lead to more ship traffic. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO-Baffinland Iron Mines Corp. ***

IQALUIT, Nunavut — Nunavut communities on the northern tip of Baffin Island are speaking out against the proposed expansion of an open-pit iron ore mine that would include construction of a railroad, lead to more ship traffic and, hunters fear, affect wildlife.

The Mary River mine is run by Baffinland Iron Mines Corp. and lies about 150 kilometres south of Pond Inlet.

The mine, which began operating in 2015, crushes iron ore on site before carrying it 100 kilometres by truck to a port where it's shipped to customers in Europe.

The mine is allowed to ship out six million tonnes of iron ore each year. Baffinland says it needs to double that output and build a 110-kilometre railway to stay profitable and reduce transportation costs. That would mean 176 ship transits each year and 20 train trips a day.

The railway would be the only one in Nunavut and the most northern one in Canada.

Public hearings before the Nunavut Impact Review Board are underway in Pond Inlet and Iqaluit on the proposed expansion.

<https://www.kamloopsthisweek.com/serious-concern-among-nunavut-communities-over-iron-ore-mine-s-proposed-expansion-1.24275195>

Inuit hunters, elders and community members who live closest to the mine say they're worried about what a railway and increased ship traffic would mean for the animals they harvest year-round like caribou, whales and narwhal.

The mine's shipping port opens onto narwhal habitat and lies within Tallurutiup Imanga, a national marine conservation area.

Baffinland also faces criticism from communities and environmental groups about its consultation with Inuit.

P.J. Akeeagok, president of a group that represents Inuit in the Baffin region, cautioned the mining company to listen to the people's concerns about the project.

"Baffinland, I ask you to be adaptive. I ask you to challenge the depth and the form of your commitments to Inuit," said Akeeagok of the Qikiqtani Inuit Association

"Don't simply say you have done enough, and now it is up to the Nunavut Impact Review Board to decide between your position and that of Inuit."

In Nunavut, proposed development projects, or changes to them, must go before the territory's impact review board, which assesses environmental and socio-economic impacts. The board then makes a recommendation to the Canadian government on whether the project should be approved.

Pond Inlet, a community of about 1,600 people, is the closest community to the mine. Four other North Baffin communities — Arctic Bay, Igloolik, Sanirajak and Clyde River — are also affected by the mine.

This isn't the first time communities have voiced concerns about the proposed expansion. A hearing originally started in November 2019, but it was shut down after communities said they had too many outstanding questions about the project's potential impacts.

This time around, communities are echoing those concerns. Lori Idlout, technical adviser for Arctic Bay, said the board has limited questions from communities.

"I implore you to put more weight on the interest of Inuit ... It is Inuit interests and impacts that we are concerned about. If we need more time, we should be given more time ... These hearings have not been fair to Inuit," Idlout said.

Clyde River Mayor Jerry Natanine said he's worried about the proposed railway's effects on caribou.

"Some of the things in this project proposal are so obviously wrong and can be fixed. It would be good if (Baffinland) was more receptive to our suggestions," he said. "It's obvious that if caribou were to come back up there, there would be caribou kills."

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Baffinland says the railway would come with mitigation measures, such as caribou crossings, to minimize the effect on local herds. The company has also offered to fund an Inuit-led environmental monitoring program that would work independently from the mine.

The affected communities have said in a joint news release that they don't support Baffinland's plans.

"The existing Mary River mine and proposed expansion have caused serious concern among North Baffin communities. While there are some benefits, we are not convinced the benefits outweigh the adverse impacts," the release said.

The Sanirajak Hunters and Trappers Organization said in another release that it doesn't feel it's been properly consulted.

"The Sanirajak HTO is concerned about how Inuit organizations representing us, the Nunavut government representing us, the Canadian government representing us, all tend to fall short of consulting with us."

The Nunavut Impact Review Board is to send a report to Dan Vandal, federal Northern Affairs minister, after the hearing.

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