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Cyanide gold extraction process worries Grand Forks water users

By FRANK PENKALA
Special To The Daily News

Pure cyanide — at least 450 tons of it — is to be used to recover gold from residual mine tailings at a mine site in the Granby watershed outside of Grand Forks.

According to Donald Pharand, a spokesman for the Grand Forks Watershed Coalition, between 180,000 and 240,000 pounds of cyanide will be used in the watershed over the next two summers.

But R.H. Seraphim, president of 24 K Mining Inc., which was previously known as Pearl Resources Ltd., says only 90,000 pounds of the chemical will be used within a closed recovery system that would never endanger the environment.

At issue, in an Environmental Appeal Board hearing held in Grand Forks on Tuesday, are the conditions in an operating permit obtained by 24 K Inc. from the waste management branch of the B.C. environment ministry.

The watershed coalition, a group concerned with water quality claiming a membership of 100 area residents, has accused the Waste Management Branch of not doing its homework.

"In February of 1985 everyone at waste management knew that (24 K Mining) did not have a water management plan," spokesman Pharand told the hearing. To date, no water management or water balance plan or environmental impact study has been submitted, said Pharand.

"The point of the whole thing is that the permit allows for effluent discharge" without assessing the impact on the environment, said GFWSC chairman Curt Garrison in an interview.

"The original permit was a non-discharge permit and it embarrassed waste management when we proved (in an October 1985 environment hearing) that there would have to be a discharge from the (heap leaching) system," Garrison said.

Vancouver lawyer Harry Hunter, chairman of the Environmental Appeal Board questioned engineer Ruben Schurr of the solid waste branch of the B.C. environment

ministry about heap leaching sites in Nevada.

"In Nevada, operation with optimal evaporation conditions still required a discharge of effluent into the environment" despite back-up systems, testified Schurr. "Traces of cyanide could be picked up eight miles down river and Nevada officials were surprised at the level (.02 milligrams per litre) of cyanide in the environment," he said.

Schurr speculated that court action could be taken against companies which failed to provide adequate safeguards for cyanide release into the environment, when asked by Hunter who would be responsible in the event of an accident.

"What does that do for the people who die?", asked Hunter.

At the end of the hearing, spokesman Pharand handed the appeal board a petition signed by 2,000 concerned citizens.

"We have had this show and tell before," said Pharand in his summation. Mining companies "have contaminated the land and they have contaminated the water. We would like to see someone come into this town to really study the problem," he said.

Counsel for the company, Ron Mellett, maintained that the "only identified contaminant is cyanide" which can be effectively neutralized; "there is no certainty of a discharge," he said.

The company "has every intention of being a good corporate citizen" and is willing to deal with what is "essentially a political issue," Mellett said.