

Wachiya. I am Bella M. Petawabano, and I am the chair of the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay – for short, the Cree Health Board.

I want to speak for a few minutes on the Cree idea of ‘health’ and how our health will be affected by uranium exploration and mining in Eeyou Istchee.

First, there are some terms you need to know. In our tongue, we have no word specifying the physiological health of an individual. The Cree concept of health is ‘miyuupimaatisiiun,’ which can be translated as ‘being alive well’ or ‘living well.’ Miyuupimaatisiiun takes into account all aspects of Cree life, including the bond between the person, the community and the land. For Crees, acting responsibly in relation to the environment is an important part of miyuupimaatisiiun.

We have a related concept, *chiyaameihtamuun*, which can be translated as ‘harmony’ or ‘peace of mind’ and refers to the quality of our lives together, in families and communities as well as with the natural environment.

Another significant term is ‘Nishiiyu,’ which, broadly translated, means ‘the people’ or ‘human beings,’ but which also embraces the idea of the interconnectedness of life, including past and future generations.

I tell you this by way of introduction to Cree health concerns, which are connected to how we live in relation to our communities and environments, our history and our legacy. Our concept of health is comprehensive: it embraces the individual, the group and the environment. It asks that we respect past and future generations. It asks that we be accountable to the community, past and future generations, and the land itself in our actions and choices.

I am going to break this down into segments that may be easier to follow – the health of the individual, the society and the environment – but keep in mind that for us these are not truly divisible.

The health profile among the Crees has changed dramatically since the signing of the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement in 1975. Modernization has brought with it many benefits and opportunities, but it has also brought a way of living that is sedentary and unhealthy, and has removed us from much that made us strong, including our traditional life on the land.

For instance, in 1983, the diabetes rate among the people of Eeyou Istchee was 2.5%. Today, it is 22%. That means one in five adult Cree has diabetes – almost three times the Quebec rate. Another 9% have been identified as being at the pre-diabetes stage. And our people are being diagnosed with diabetes at a younger age than people in the rest of Québec, which puts them at greater risk of developing serious complications during their lifetime. We are also seeing more cardiovascular diseases. This isn't surprising as both diabetes and cardiovascular illnesses share the same roots. We were an active people, living on the land and working our bodies hard to survive, but now many of us have adopted lifestyles that involve little physical activity, a southern diet of high-calorie fast food and smoking.

Our people now face many addiction and mental health problems. The rates of hospitalization for suicide attempts and ideation is about ten times that found in the rest of Quebec, and suicide attempts are the top cause of female hospitalizations in Eeyou Istchee.

Diabetes, heart disease, addiction and mental illness are health problems that afflict individuals, but they are endemic in Cree communities and grow from social and cultural health determinants. We have experienced rapid and radical change in how we live due to

modernization and development, and this change has destabilized traditional Cree society and values. Our communities are afflicted by unemployment, low levels of education, overcrowded and poor-quality housing, difficulties in accessing healthy foods, and a history of colonization, with all its tools of oppression – residential schools, for instance. These very troubling issues reflect a world where miyuupimaatisiiuun and chiyaameihtamuun are endangered.

Cree health, as I have said, is connected to the health of the land. The Cree people believe that the Great Spirit [God/Tcheymendo?] gave us as a gift a beautiful homeland – the place we call Eeyou Istchee. I should note that ‘Istchee’ does not refer simply to ‘land’ or ‘environment,’ but also to that land’s intimate connection to humans – to the Cree people. So we have a profound responsibility to this land, as it is a part of us. We are its stewards, its guardians. It is our job to ensure that it is cared for, protected, and preserved for our children, our children’s children, and the countless generations that will follow. This is a sacred trust, and Cree identity and miyuupimaatisiiuun is fundamentally connected to this trust, and to the land. To abandon our responsibility to Eeyou Istchee would be a denial of our own history and culture.

Already the land has changed. Hydroelectric dams have flooded much of Eeyou Istchee, drowning traditional traplines (including my birth place). The dams have also changed water flow into James Bay. For instance, at Chisasibi we no longer fish as we used to, nor travel safely on the ice, because the water flows more quickly than it had before the LG1 dam. This also has affected the migration of Canada geese, and the Chisasibi hunt during the annual “goose break” is no longer as productive as it once was. These are changes that affect the health of Crees in the area, who now eat less fish than previously, lowering consumption of omega-3s and increasing risks of heart disease. The loss of these fishing grounds has rendered people less healthy.

The lands offer us nourishment that is not only physical, but also spiritual. Let me tell you a story. Elder Robbie Mathews tells of his father helping people who suffered from depression. He would take the depressed individual into his home, which was his camp, and would ensure that the family would show respect towards him and make him comfortable. And every day his father would take the man to do outdoor chores such as setting or checking animal traps. They would make a fire outdoors to have their lunch and return back to camp while there was still day light. This is what they did until the man was better and ready to return to his own family. Elder Robbie learned from his father, doing the same: he cared for a man suffering from depression, taking him took to his hunting ground along with his children. Being with the land helped heal these men.

At the Cree Health Board, we try to follow Robbie Mathew's example. We are developing proactive educational and cultural programs aim to get people, and especially youth, engaged in the traditional activities that made our grandparents strong, and to reconnect people to the land. We aim to foster our Cree pride in our history and our traditions, to help our people respect themselves as well as their heritage. This too is part of miyuupimaatisiiun.

What does this have to do with uranium mining? Our opposition to uranium mining stems from these observations. Uranium poses short-term benefits – in employment, economic development, and growth of infrastructure – but also long-term risks. The prosperity promised by jobs will last a few years, but the risk posed by the dangerous waste that mining inevitably produces will last for generations upon generations.

The mining process inevitably produces waste known as tailings, and uranium mining produces tailings that are both toxic and radioactive. Uranium milling also leaves residual waste. When the uranium has been mined and milled, it will be taken away from Eeyou Istchee. But the tailings and other waste rock will be left on our land, to remain here in perpetuity. And this creates a permanent threat to the health of the land.

We know that mining companies propose plans to contain such waste, but uranium tailings may continue to release radiation for hundreds of thousands of years – much longer than the most far-sighted plans of mining companies. Could tailings leach into the soil and enter surrounding streams and groundwater? Could they enter the food chain? Will fish or caribou accumulate radioactive waste in their bloodstream? Will Cree hunters stop harvesting caribou because they fear such a danger? Our traditional foods are an important part of Cree life, and the loss of this food, whether due to contamination or anxiety over the possibility of such contamination, would be devastating to our health and culture.

In addition to producing waste that is radioactive, uranium mining – like all mining – also creates waste that is chemically toxic. This chemical toxicity may present a larger immediate threat. For an example, we only have to look as far as the environmental disaster that occurred at a copper and gold mine at Mount Polley in British Columbia on August 4th, when the reservoir holding the tailings burst, sending toxic waste, including 400 tons of arsenic in addition to other heavy metals, into the water system. We ask ‘Could such a thing happen here?’ And the answer is all too clear: Yes, it could. And this would create a profound health risk.

Furthermore, once the mine itself is shut down and the mining company has counted its profits and left Eeyou Istchee behind, how will the abandoned sites be maintained? They will need to be looked after for generations upon generations. How can we ensure that there are no leakages of radiation or toxic chemicals? And what impact might environmental changes over time have on the site? Will climate change lead to increased precipitation, and what impact might that have on current plans to maintain the sites and the tailings? Our belief is that we cannot ensure the safety of the land after the mine has been closed, and we have yet to hear any convincing arguments to the contrary.

Uranium mining creates a radioactive and toxic legacy that will last for many thousands of years. If there is a tailings breach, or if there is contamination from an abandoned mine, all of the mining companies' money will not heal the land.

Because uranium mining poses serious risks to the health of the land, it also threatens the health of the Cree people. We cannot abdicate our responsibilities to protect the land if we perceive that it is in danger. To do so would be a betrayal of our Cree way of life and our values as a people.

As it stands, Cree people already face many health challenges, such as diabetes. We don't need any additional threats. Miyuupimaatisiwin and chiyaameihtamuun have been weakened by the changes to Cree life in recent years. Our goal at the Cree Health Board is to find ways, new and old, to strengthen miyuupimaatisiwin and chiyaameihtamuun in our communities. We do not believe that uranium mining in Eeyou Istchee will support us in this goal.

The Grand Council rejected uranium mining in 2012 and again last summer. My comments today are informed by the memorandum deposited by our Regional Public Health Department. That document expresses a concern that “uranium development in Eeyou Istchee might add to the significant burden of physical and social health problems already occurring in the communities.” Today, in my role as Chair, I would like to go further and say that we, the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, stand with our youth and we stand against uranium.