

## The role of public consultation in leading practice uranium mining

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As the raw material used to fuel nuclear power plants to generate significant amounts of electricity with life cycle carbon emissions as low as renewable energy sources, uranium is a valuable energy commodity. Yet the mining of uranium remains controversial, principally because of the environmental and health impacts created in the early years of the industry when uranium mining was conducted by governments to meet military requirements during the Cold War. At the time, maximising production in the face of rapidly rising demand was the principal goal and little concern was given to properly managing environmental and health impacts or community relations.

Uranium mining is now conducted under significantly different circumstances than those in the early era of production for military purposes. Since then, societal expectations of environmental protection and the safety of workers and the public have evolved as the outcomes of the early era of mining became apparent, driving changes in regulatory oversight and mining practices. Leading practice uranium mining is now the most regulated and arguably one of the safest forms of mining in the world.

Public consultation was seldom, if ever, undertaken in the early stages of uranium mining. As with other forms of mining, societal attitudes about health and safety and environmental protection have been accompanied by an expectation that public participation should be an integral part of planning and approval processes for uranium mines along with transparency and assurances of performance throughout the entire life cycle of the facility. Leading practice uranium mining includes repeated opportunities for public consultation throughout the life of a mining facility.

Major milestones for public consultation in the mine life cycle include the environmental impact assessment process that engages the interested public and special interest groups, such as local native and aboriginal populations. In order to demonstrate that facilities are performing as designed, the collection of baseline environmental data to objectively assess ecosystem impacts through the life of the mine by environmental monitoring programmes is essential to provide assurance of performance. Public consultation opportunities in presenting the results of the environmental monitoring programmes have proven critical to maintaining trust that the operations are performing as planned.

Communication with neighbouring communities in decisions that affect them is critical to maintaining a social license to mine. An ongoing dialogue among the main stakeholders: the community, the mining company and the government has proven critical in this regard. With careful execution and participation of the main stakeholders, and adequate funding set aside for site remediation by mining companies, public funding for uranium mine site legacies and remediation should no longer be required and the goal of ensuring that no additional legacy uranium mining and milling issues are created will be assured.

Included in this presentation are examples of public consultation in uranium mine operations that illustrate some of the challenges faced when undertaking public consultation and how such programmes can effectively increase public confidence and support of uranium mining, strengthening the social license to conduct the mining activity.

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