

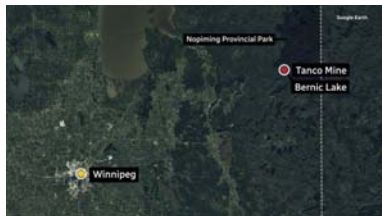


**Federal government may scrutinize Chinese mine near Nopiming park amid rising tensions** [Bartley Kives](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 06, 2023 5:00 AM CDT

The Chinese owner of the Tanco mine in eastern Manitoba has revived talk of partly draining a lake in order to extract more cesium from one of the world's few deposits of the critical mineral. Sinomine Resource Group is musing about a long-term redevelopment of the mine it purchased in 2019 along the shore of Bernic Lake, a small Canadian Shield body of water located between Whiteshell and Nopiming provincial parks. The goal is to reach cesium that cannot be mined right now, because it's embedded in vertical columns that hold up the roof of the underground mine.

"There's a type of mining called 'room and pillar' where you mine a big cavern underground, but you leave pillars which are like poles of rock that support the ceiling. If you don't have them, the whole mine collapses," said Christopher Ecclestone, a mining strategist at Hallgarten & Company in London, U.K. "When Tanco was mining this thing for decades, they left these pillars to support the roof. And the Chinese are talking about taking them out."

The push to mine what's left of Tanco's cesium stems from the worldwide scarcity of the element, which is used in drilling fluids for oil and gas wells, medical imaging and maintaining time in atomic clocks, among other uses. In its pure form, cesium is liquid at room temperature, may burst into flames in air and will explode in contact with water. In nature, it's usually locked up far more safely in a rock called pollucite. Nowhere on Earth has as much of this mineral as the Tanco mine, which once possessed two-thirds of the planet's easily accessible pollucite.



The Tanco Mine is located about 135 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg, between Whiteshell and Nopiming provincial parks. (CBC News Graphics)

In June, the general manager of Sinomine's North American business division told the Globe & Mail the company could extract more cesium from the Tanco mine by replacing the existing rock pillars with artificial supports for the roof. The Beijing-based company's preferred option for the Manitoba mine, however, would be to partly drain Bernic Lake in order to reach cesium from the surface, Sinomine's Frank Wang told the Globe in a story published June 17. "The final goal definitely is we want to have open-pit mining," Wang told the Toronto-based newspaper. While Sinomine declined subsequent CBC News requests for interviews, Tanco general manager Joey Champagne confirmed the parent company is weighing several ideas for redeveloping the mine. "We are currently evaluating various options for the long-term development of Tanco, each of which requires further assessment. Any potential expansions will undergo a rigorous review process and be in compliance with applicable Canadian laws," Champagne said in a statement this week. "At this stage, we do not have any additional information to share until we have more concrete plans in place."

No plans have been forwarded to the provincial government, said Manitoba Environment and Climate Minister Kevin Klein, adding he was unaware of the company's desire to drain part of Bernic Lake until Wednesday. "The process in every environmental licence is unique, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that," Klein said in Winnipeg. [The rookie minister is already in the midst of weighing an unrelated decision to approve or deny a 24-year sand-mining proposal in southern Manitoba by Alberta miner Sio Silica.](#) [Critics of proposed Manitoba silica sand mine applaud environmental report that casts doubt on project safety](#) Unlike the silica-mining plan, which would employ novel technology, the idea of draining Bernic Lake to access more cesium below it is not new. Tanco's previous owner approached the province with a plan to partly drain the lake a decade ago but did not obtain approval. Right now, Sinomine is doing a good job of managing waste from the Tanco mine and is not impacting the forests near Bernic Lake or the watershed downstream, said Eric Reder, a campaigner for the Wilderness Committee in Manitoba. "There aren't a lot of concerns about what's going on, but as soon as you want to expand into an open-pit mine, you've changed the equation," Reder said Wednesday in an interview from Lee River, Man. "And as soon as you decide that you want to drain the lake into the lower Bird River, that's where you come into immense opposition."



A waterfall on the lower portion of the Bird River. Eric Reder of the Wilderness Committee said he fears the river's water quality will suffer if Bernic Lake is drained into it. (Submitted by Eric Reder) Reder said draining Bernic Lake would add sediment to the Bird River, which drains into the Winnipeg River at Lac du Bonnet. He also claimed Bernic Lake is polluted, though a report prepared for Tanco by environmental consulting firm Tetra Tech states the lake is not toxic even though it possesses elevated concentrations of antimony, beryllium, cesium, lithium, manganese, rubidium, silicon and strontium.

Sagkeeng First Nation, a Treaty 3 Anishinaabe nation that sits along the Winnipeg River and counts Bernic Lake as part of its traditional territory, called the idea of partly draining the lake very concerning. "We have told the owners of the Tanco Mine that moving forward with that plan will require a comprehensive impact assessment and that it cannot proceed without Sagkeeng's free, prior and informed consent," Chief EJ Fontaine said in a statement. "We are pleased that the new owners of the Tanco Mine have reached out to us in a much more positive way than the previous owners ever did, and we are hopeful that that outreach may lead to a positive, mutually beneficial relationship based on respect for the Sagkeeng's inherent rights and for the environment."

The chief administrator for the rural municipality of Alexander, which straddles long sections of both the Bird and Winnipeg rivers, declined to comment on the prospect of draining Bernic Lake in the absence of a formal proposal from Sinomine.



Cesium is used to keep time in atomic clocks, among other uses. Every mobile phone in the world keeps time with the help of these precision devices. (Canadian Press)

Ecclestone, in London, said the Canadian government now has an opportunity to oppose Sinomine's expansion of its Tanco operations four years after allowing the Chinese company to purchase the mine and effectively corner the world's cesium-production market. "The argument was it's a defunct cesium mine. So suddenly it's not a defunct cesium mine and the Chinese have it," Ecclestone said. "The question is, does Canada or the U.S. really want that cesium owned by a foreign outfit?"

Last year, amid increasing tensions with China, Canada's Liberal government started scrutinizing prospective Chinese moves into critical minerals more closely in this country. Liberal MP Terry Duguid, the parliamentary secretary to the environment and climate minister, said Ottawa would defer to the province over any environmental consideration involving a Tanco redevelopment — but would also scrutinize such a move on its own. "We do have a security lens on any mining developments in our country, including this one, and so that would obviously be a consideration in both an environmental assessment and a security assessment," Duguid said Wednesday in Winnipeg, referring both to a prospective cesium-mining redevelopment and a separate Tanco proposal to refine lithium in Manitoba. "What we want to do is keep critical minerals here at home for our battery factories and for our new economy industries of the future."

Reder said Canada should simply require Sinomine to sell the Tanco mine. "If cesium or any of the other critical minerals that keep being floated out as this most valuable resource ever, if we really needed those minerals, then this mine should be nationalized," he said. "We should take this over from the mining company and operate it for the benefit of Manitobans, not for an offshore corporation who wants to profit off of this."

Ecclestone said he doesn't believe the mine redevelopment will ever happen. "It's a sign of quite severe desperation that you're going to drain a lake just to take out the pillars of the leftovers," he said. "We're not talking about enormous deposits here. We're talking about the leftovers of an enormous deposit."



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