

Manitoba Liberals Call for Federal Review of Vivian Sands Project

September 28, 2020

TREATY 1 TERRITORY, WINNIPEG, MANITOBA - Manitoba Liberals are asking the Federal Government to do a full environmental review alongside provincial reviews of the Vivian Sands project, a massive sand-mine project with untested technology being built over Manitoba's largest aquifer.

Dr. Jon Gerrard, Manitoba Liberal Critic for Sustainable Development, said many residents are strongly opposed to the project going ahead because of the risks to groundwater.

Gerrard wrote the letter to Federal Environment Minister Jonathan Wilkinson. The deadline for Manitobans to submit their concerns is today, September 28, 2020.

Many of CanWhite's objections to and denials of residents' concerns are because CanWhite is only talking about the processing plant - not the mine. Liberals and residents say approving the two separately makes no sense because the processing plant can only work if the mine is approved as well.

"Asking to approve a factory before a mine is like asking to approve a sawmill before the plans to clearcut a forest have been approved," said Gerrard. "If we are going to safeguard the ground water for the thousands of people who depend on it, the mine and the plant all need to be considered together as part of a Federal review."

Gerrard said the Liberals believe the environmental impact of the mine should also take into consideration what the sand is being used for. On its website, the company, CanWhite, said the sand could be used for glass, fibre optics, or other purposes.

That claim is at odds with a now-deleted online presentation to investors that CanWhite CEO Faisal Somji made in 2019. In that presentation, Somji made it clear the entire purpose for the sand mine and processing facility was to produce sand for use in frack-mining for shale oil markets in Alberta and the Bakken Field in North Dakota.

The Liberals' request for a federal review coincides with the release by the Auditor General of a report into Provincial Oversight into Drinking Water Safety that shows that provincial government's licensing, testing, and enforcement to ensure clean drinking water is inadequate - even in schools.

The report found that Manitoba has "No clear, robust plan to address the many risks to drinking water safety." Further, the Department of Conservation and Climate - which is responsible for approving the Vivian Sands project - was found to be "inadequately minimiz[ing] safety risks related to drinking water." As well, "the Department has weak strategic planning and performance measurement processes for overseeing drinking water safety."

Manitoba Liberal Leader Dougald Lamont said the Auditor General's report shows that a Federal Review of the project is critical.

"If the Pallister government can't even test water in public schools, there's not much hope for the impacts on an aquifer that could be subject to contamination and pollution from boreholes." said Lamont.

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