

# Gripped by Gypsum

Without expansion project, plant predicts closure by 2012

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The Avon Peninsula is a beautiful, pastoral part of Hants County with a history of family farming and woodlot management. The eastern part of the peninsula is also the site of the Miller's Creek quarry mined as part of Fundy Gypsum Company's on-going operations.

Recently, Fundy Gypsum has announced plans to expand its mining operations into the high, wooded land in the interior of the western part of the peninsula. This expansion and its potential consequences for communities in the area has become a controversial issue.

Over 100 residents have formed the Avon Peninsula Watershed Preservation Society (APWPS). Their chief concerns are that the watershed and the unique ecology of the area will be damaged by quarry operations. Raymond Parker, spokesperson for the group and local farmer, said that the Society has been working hard to make its concerns known but they are facing a determined opponent.

"Fundy Gypsum has been quietly buying land in this area for several years. Now they hold title to

around 1,000 acres. They claim they hold the gypsum rights to these properties anyway. What they seem to be doing is dealing with people individually rather than consulting the community as a whole. This means that not many people are aware of the extent and range of the proposed project," Parker said.

Mike Bishop, Plant Manager for Fundy Gypsum, confirmed that the Company has around 1,000 acres in the area. "Our problem," he said, "is that we're running out of mineable gypsum at the Wentworth and Miller's Creek sites. If we don't expand our operations into this part of the peninsula, we'll run out of gypsum and have to close down by 2012."

Fundy Gypsum has been operating in Hants County for the past 80 years: at Wentworth since 1926 and at Miller's Creek since 1956. The Company is the key customer for the Windsor Hantsport Railway and the Hantsport ship loading facility and employs 150-160 full time persons, plus 15-20 persons with the railway. Bishop says all the jobs are held by local people. "The expansion of the Miller's Creek operation will not create any new jobs but it will sustain our work force for approximately the next 50 years."

Raymond Parker says that

APWPS is developing a very different vision of the future of the peninsula. "One of our goals is to achieve a permanent moratorium on gypsum mining east of Ferry Road. We are also working with other community residents to develop and implement a sustainable land use plan for the Avon Peninsula, including the Commons watershed area." He explains that many residents still refer to the upland of the watershed as the 'Commons' because, although owned by individuals, it was once managed collectively by local farmers.

Both the Society and the Company have made presentations to the West Hants Municipal Council, which has not yet taken a position on the matter. Mike Bishop said the company agrees that the quality and quantity of water supplies in the area is a key issue but they prefer to meet one-on-one with individuals to discuss specific concerns about water. Bishop said that, "Over the past 50 years, we've never had to fix or replace a neighbouring well in the Miller's Creek area." The Company is conducting a number of studies of the bioregion in preparation for filing for a Provincial Environmental Review early in 2007.

The Society has initiated its own

"Community-Based Environmental Assessment" of the proposed expansion. Parker said, "Communities have lost faith in the official environmental review process because they are not included in the process until the very last stages. The company works with the government behind closed doors and then presents this huge technical package that has to be quickly absorbed and responded to by the communities concerned. The process is weighted towards mitigation of the project by the proponents rather than sustainable outcomes for communities. It becomes a question of how the project will go ahead, not if it should go ahead."

Parker said the Society prefers public meetings with the whole community so that a real dialogue can take place. Mike Bishop said the company will call a public meeting during the final phase of the Environmental Review.

These two seemingly incompatible visions and goals for the future of the Avon Peninsula pose a familiar dilemma. Is "business as usual" a higher good than community and ecological sustainability? In a small province, how do we decide these issues that, no matter where they are geographically, are always close to home?