

Northern Saskatchewan to benefit from uranium deal; environmentalists worried

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Laurie Thorsen owns and operates 147 Outfitters Ltd., a small roadside restaurant, motel and gas station in the tiny northern Saskatchewan village of Wollaston Lake.

He said business has been steady the last five years, but he has reason to believe it's going to get a lot busier.

On February 9, Prime Minister Stephen Harper signed a deal with China which will send Saskatchewan uranium to the Far East. Much of that uranium will come from the province's Athabasca Basin, source of the world's largest high-grade uranium deposits. The basin includes Rabbit Lake, the site of the longest operating uranium production facility in North America and the second largest uranium mill in the world, and Key Lake, the top high-grade uranium mill in the world.

Wollaston Lake is roughly 40 km from Rabbit Lake and it's the closest permanent settlement to the productive uranium mine. The village stands to reap sizable economic benefits and growth from the recent uranium agreement. Thorsen, for one, can't wait for more people and heavier trucking traffic in the area.

"It's going to make a hell of a difference in the north," he said. "It should be wonderful for us and it should be wonderful for the people in the north, too, because the mines create a ton of jobs."

Thorsen isn't the only one excited about this agreement. The Saskatchewan government is also thrilled.

“In terms of long term benefits it will mean hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue to the province of Saskatchewan through payment of appropriate royalties and taxes,” said Bob Ellis, Director of Public Affairs for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Energy and Resources.

And as Thorsen noted, the agreement will boost employment numbers. Cameco Corporation, the largest uranium producer in the province, is also the largest provider of jobs to aboriginals in northern Saskatchewan, and with the Canada-China uranium agreement it stands to make \$3 billion in profit and create more long-term employment opportunities.

“This has got great potential, not only for direct employment at the mines, but also at the various companies and businesses that supply those mines,” said Ellis. “This is really a good news story for the north and northern communities.”

But it’s not necessarily good news for some environmentalists.

Ann Coxworth is a board member of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society. She is concerned the federal government is relaxing security regulations on China’s uses of the uranium.

“There has been a suggestion that maybe they will be transferring some (uranium) to Pakistan, which is obviously in a pretty unstable situation as far as nuclear weapons are concerned. So, I would feel a lot more comfortable if we knew that there was going to be a very strict accounting for how the uranium is used once it arrives in China,” Coxworth said.

She’s also worried increased uranium production could have harmful effects in the province, especially hazardous effects in the form of uranium tailings.

"The main concern with the tailings is the leakage of radioactive materials into groundwater that could then get into surface water and drinking water supply."

No date has yet been set on when the first uranium exports will be sent China's way.