Hydroelectric project poses risks for the country that are being ignored

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STAR CALDER
SALTWIRE NETWORK VIA TIMES TELEGRAM

September saw the scheduled flooding at the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric facility in Labrador, with the first power from the facility set to start this fall. The $12.7 billion provincial investment in green energy has driven Newfoundland and Labrador to the verge of bankruptcy and made a global exhibition of Canada’s natural resource development. Too often the experience of Indigenous Peoples are treated as afterthoughts.

The province has spent the past 10 years trying to engage the Labrador Inuit over their credible concerns of health impacts from the hydroelectric project. It has ignored both the available scientific evidence and the recommendations of an independent committee it itself created.

Accusations that the province of Newfoundland and Labrador misled the Labrador Inuit over its plans to mitigate the risk associated with the hydroelectric project have led to a wave of public discontent.

Although there has been some Canadian media interest in Muskrat Falls, the coverage has generally centered on the systemic factors that enabled the province to disregard the constitutional rights of the Labrador Inuit.

International news coverage has ignored Muskrat Falls as part of a broader trend, in which Canadian hydroelectric development is almost always pursued at the expense of Indigenous populations. This threatens the viability of Canadian hydropower, which depends on access to the U.S. export market.

Muskrat Falls seems to be bringing a changing American perception of the sustainability and democratic legitimacy of Canadian hydropower imports compared to other renewables. Muskrat Falls therefore jeopardizes Canada’s economic survival, in addition to its moral credibility.

MUSKRAT FALLS AND MERCURY MELT

Flooding hydroelectric reservoirs accelerates the microbial decomposition of soil organic matter and production of methylmercury. Methylmercury is a potent neurotoxin that can accumulate in local fish and other aquatic species such as seals and birds. Prevental exposure to methylmercury is associated with a host of neurodevelopmental impacts, including ADHD and reduced IQ. Any increase in exposures, even at low levels, increases the risks.

All seawater consumers are exposed to methylmercury. But for most people, the benefits of eating seafood exceed the risks.

Indigenous communities face higher risks of food insecurity due to high food prices and low opportunities for wage labour. They are often dependent on access to (and trust in) traditional food sources for nutritional sufficiency.

Hydroelectric development threatens forces affecting communities to choose between two evils — higher methylmercury exposures or changes to the most nutritious part of their diets.

Renewable energy plan

The Muskrat Falls hydroelectric facility was commissioned in 2012 as the cornerstone of the Lower Churchill Project, an ambitious plan to provide renewable energy to Atlantic Canada and New England.

Throughout the planning and permitting phase, the Labrador Inuit voiced concerns over potential methylmercury impacts that had been extended into Lake Melville, an area about 50 kilometers downstream from Muskrat Falls.

In part, these fears were driven by the experience of Churchill Falls, a previous hydroelectric project upstream of Muskrat Falls. After the Churchill Falls project, fish methylmercury levels increased more than 10 times above baseline levels at their peak. These impacts were observed more than 560 kilometers downstream and persisted for more than 30 years.

Nalcor, the provincial Crown corporation responsible for the project, concludes that flooding is likely to increase methylmercury levels in the reservoir and river environment. However, it has maintained since 2009 that “there is no reasonable possibility of impact on Labrador Inuit, a position unchanged in 2016 and again by the provincial government in 2019.”

LOOK TO QUÉBEC

Richly 10 percent of the electricity generated by Canada is exported to the United States, driving a hydroelectric boom north of the border. Northern states have been counting on Canadian hydropower to achieve their renewable energy targets. However, the U.S. environmental lobby is increasingly hostile to importation of Canadian hydropower, fearing state-wide development of renewables such as wind and solar.

For example, the North American Megaplan Resistance, a new broad advocacy group, has drawn on the experience of Marjorie Flowers, an anti-Hydropower activist imprisoned for her protest against Muskrat Falls, to argue against hydro-power imports from Québec.

Meanwhile, the Conservation Law Foundation is setting the stage for a legal challenge to the U.S. Department of Energy’s deference to Canadian environmental assessments in authorizing cross-border electrical connections. Currently, the DOE defers to Canada to evaluate impacts within its borders on the permit that impacts are assessed and reconciled within a democratic framework.

Simultaneously, growing perception among international policy makers that Canadian natural resources are tainted by undemocratic processes and downstream Indigenous rights supposedly expedited in both Canadian and international policy contexts. By the end of 2019, the United States National Renewable Energy Laboratory has called for a “greater understanding of the views of Indigenous communities by Canadian governments regarding methylmercury impacts.”

LOOK TO QUEBEC

Conversely, Newfoundland and Labrador has spent years flouting court-ordered stipulations. It is now reliant on the advice of consultants retained via short-term contract to understand the likely impacts of its natural resource endpoint.

Quebec has invested heavily in creating and maintaining scientific capacity and politically independent public institutions. It has had the net result of increasing the democratic legitimacy of its economic projects. A moral standing for economic success may depend on other provinces catching up. Ryar Calder is a postdoctoral associate at Duke University. This article first appeared on theconversation.com.