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RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM SERIES

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Comfort monitoring? Privatization and environmental assessment follow-up in Saskatchewan's uranium mining industry

Occupying nearly one third of the surface area of the Saskatchewan Shield (100,000 km²), the Athabasca Basin is one of the world's largest sources of uranium, contributing approximately 22% to global supply. The Basin is also home to three remote Aboriginal settlements and four small hamlets and communities. Follow-up and monitoring of the impacts of uranium mining in the Athabasca Basin occurs under two frameworks — regulatory-based EIA and, more recently, privatized community-industry negotiated environmental agreements. Negotiated agreements are becoming common-practice in the mining industry, with more than 120 agreements currently established nation-wide. In principle, negotiated agreements are said to respond to many of the shortcomings of EIA by providing for improved follow-up of project impacts through, among other things, data provision, engaging stakeholders in monitoring and impact management activities, and building capacity at the local level to deal with project-induced environmental change. In practice, however, little is known about the efficacy of monitoring under negotiated agreements and the demonstrated value-added to project impact management. This presentation will discuss follow-up practices in the Athabasca uranium mining industry, and examine whether and how monitoring under the negotiated agreement actually contributes to improved project impact management. Results will show that follow-up under the agreement is best described as "comfort monitoring". Although such monitoring does improve community-industry relations and enhance corporate image, it does little to support effects-based management. If monitoring under negotiated agreements is to be credible over the long term, there is a need to ensure that monitoring results are useful for, and integrated with, regulatory-based monitoring and project impact management practices.

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