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## Open pit uranium mine raises health concerns

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Plans to construct the Northwest Territories' first open pit uranium mine on the tundra near Baker Lake have sparked Inuit opposition and the formation of a coalition that includes regional government and health officials.

The Northern Anti-Uranium Coalition this week called for federal environment minister Lucien Bouchard to halt preliminary hearings for an environmental review until details of the proposal can be translated into the Inuit language.

Tagak Curley, head of the coalition, says that although the proposal has the support of the local municipal council, there is widespread concern among Inuit hunters and a majority of the 1,100 residents of Baker Lake.

Earlier this week he sent a letter to Mr. Bouchard, expressing the group's concerns and asking why a letter sent to the minister three months ago about the issue, has still not been answered.

Uranengesellschaft Canada Ltd. of West Germany, which found uranium deposits in the area in the early 1980s, has proposed the construction of two open pit mines, a work camp for 250 workers, a transportation corridor to a nearby port and a 2,000-metre airstrip. The site of the mine complex is 75 kilometres from Baker Lake, a settlement 600 kilometres north of Churchill, Man.

A federal environmental assessment review of the mine site, ordered by Ottawa, is scheduled to begin in two weeks.

However, the coalition, which includes the Keewatin Regional Council, the regional health board, the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut and an Inuit association, wants it delayed.

Mr. Curley, president of the Keewatin Wildlife Federation and one of the founders in 1971 of the first Inuit political organizations in the Arctic, said that, despite an appeal three months ago, details of the proposal are still not available in Inuktitut.

In an telephone interview, Mr. Curley said there is concern about the effect of the mine and its by-product contamination on caribou. He said many of the Inuit hunter families depend year-round on the animals. Any adverse effect, he said, would go well beyond the Baker Lake community because the caribou migrate thousands of miles.

A spokesman in Mr. Bouchard's office referred calls to Ray Robinson, executive chairman of the Federal Environmental Assessment Review Office, an independent body which carries out the reviews.

Mr. Robinson said he had not yet received the letter and did not know what would be done in answer to the request.

The hearings, being held to allow public input into drafting the scope of the environmental studies, have already been postponed once, he said, from March to May at the request of the coalition.

As well, he said the coalition has been given "tens of thousands" of dollars to help it prepare.

Mr. Robinson said members of the panel have already appeared before the NWT Territorial Assembly in Yellowknife to outline plans and the procedure for the hearing. He said that, after the three-hour meeting, panel members were praised by members of the assembly on both sides of the issue.

Mr. Robinson said that a reply to Mr. Curley's January letter had been prepared by FEARO but he couldn't explain why it wasn't sent.