

# Uranium drilling fight gets hot

**Natives warn of threat to Ottawa's water as company looks to court to end blockade**

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A month-long standoff between two Algonquin communities in Eastern Ontario and a uranium prospecting company will be moving from a make-shift blockade near Sharbot Lake to a Kingston courtroom today, after the Ardoch Lake and Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nations were served with a \$75-million lawsuit last week.

In late June, the two communities had joined forces to prevent Frontenac Ventures from drilling for uranium core samples on disputed land. Since then, all have been embroiled in what has been, so far, a test of nerves. Each side has accused the other of using intimidation tactics. The Algonquins allege the big-ticket lawsuit is Frontenac's latest "stunt."

The company has staked more than 5,000 hectares and was about to start drilling when the Algonquins and their supporters blocked them from accessing the land. They set up a gated base camp near Sharbot Lake, about 50 kilometres north of Kingston, and put up signs and flags, parked a couple of trailers and pitched tents. A handful of people have remained on-site 24 hours a day since June 28, and a number of volunteers guard the perimeter of the staked land.

The Algonquins say the land belongs to them -- most Ardoch Lake and Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nations are non-status Indians, meaning they never signed a treaty to extinguish their land rights in exchange for reserves and services -- and they're upset the province didn't consult them before giving Frontenac Ventures permission to explore for uranium.

The Algonquins and their supporters say they're worried that exploration and mining will contaminate their lands and water with radioactive waste. The waterways, they point out, are connected to the Ottawa River and could affect the drinking water in the nation's capital.

Frontenac's lawyer, Neal Smitheman, said he will be seeking an injunction to have the blockade removed while working on getting Frontenac access to its mining claims, which were approved by the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines.

"If we don't get something resolved soon, it could put the company out of business," Mr. Smitheman said. "When you do things like this, when you occupy and prevent access to people from doing what they have a lawful right to do, they can have serious ramifications."

Paula Sherman, co-chief of the Ardoch Lake First Nations, said the lawsuit has only strengthened her people's resolve.

"We're not leaving until there's a moratorium on uranium mining," said Ms. Sherman, who has been living in a trailer at the base camp.

"We will never allow them to have entry. It's our land. We have a responsibility to take care of the land for future generations."

The apparent confusion over land ownership comes at a time when several Algonquin communities in Ontario are engaged in land-claim negotiations with the provincial government. Frontenac's staked land is just part of a vast territory in dispute, stretching from Algonquin Park all the way to the front lawn of Parliament Hill.

The Ardoch Lake and Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nations only recently discovered Frontenac Ventures was on the land when an area resident showed up at an Ardoch Lake council meeting a few months ago.

Frank Morrison, who owns 100 hectares of pristine streams, meadows and trees in North Frontenac, found out last November that his land had been prospected for uranium.

His story was featured in the Citizen earlier this month, where he described coming across scarred trees and stumps bearing metal tags with the Ontario trillium symbol. Mr. Morrison started doing some of his own digging, and found a 139-year-old piece of Ontario legislation that allowed mining prospectors "free entry" to his property. He also learned he didn't own the "mineral rights" to his land, so while he owned the surface of the land, he did not own what was buried beneath. And, he found out who the prospector was: Frontenac Ventures.

"Frank came in and said all of his land had been dug up," Ms. Sherman said.

"We began to check it out and discovered roads had been dug out and trees had been cleared."

Algonquin representatives confirmed with the ministry that a chunk of their land had indeed been staked by Frontenac Ventures. First came disbelief. Then anger. And, as word spread throughout the community, non-natives joined in the fight. This week, Dawn King drove to the base camp from near Perth, bringing food and supplies.

"It's a human issue. It's not a native issue. It will affect us all," said Ms. King after unloading a carload of donations from the community, including toilet paper, homemade salsa, bread, eggs and cheese.

Earl Recoskie, a 56-year-old retiree, moved to the area six months ago, drawn to North Frontenac's beautiful lakes and marshes. He wasn't happy when he found out Frontenac Ventures was planning to dig for uranium. He now visits the blockade every day.

"It's disastrous, as far as I'm concerned," he said, resting under the shade of a tent. "We find out a uranium mine could very well be in our backyard. For our sakes and the First Nations' sakes, we are going to do everything we can to try and stop it."

But while much frustration lies with Frontenac, Mr. Recoskie and Ms. King said they were disappointed with the province's inaction.

"You can say what you want about ... any business. They're going to try to do what they're going to do to make money. But the government has the responsibility to do what's right," Mr. Recoskie said.

That's one thing that the Algonquins and Frontenac Ventures can agree on: that the Ontario government granted permits to the company. They gave the go-ahead without saying a word; not a word to Frontenac about the potential conflicts they could face with the local Algonquins, and not a word to the Algonquins, who only learned of the drilling plans when Mr. Morrison tipped them off.

"We do have an obligation to consult First Nations," allowed Laura Blondeau, press secretary for Rick Bartolucci, minister of northern development and mines. But did the ministry consult the Ardoch Lake and Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nations before Frontenac moved in

"I cannot confirm this," said Ms. Blondeau, who could only say that the ministry was continuing "to establish better processes" when dealing with such matters.

Randy Cota, co-chief of the Ardoch Lake First Nations, said many people in the community are fed up.

"We're used to this, (First Nations) have been burned so many times," he said. "The government asks, 'Why can't you trust us?' When (throughout) all of our Canadian history, can you tell me one time when we ever got a fair shake?"

"Frontenac Ventures is really a prospector rather than a mining company," he said. "They are trying to gather samples to see if it's a feasible mining site. They want to drill some holes and get some samples. It's no different for someone to drill a hole for water in that area."

But Mr. Cota said there would be no drilling of any kind on the disputed land.

"It's our homeland, we have no place else in the world for the Algonquin people to call home," he said. "We have a responsibility to the land, to respect her and not abuse her. It's time for us to step up to the plate."