

Social and Cultural Impacts of the Mining Cycle

Excerpts from the 2008 “Boom to Bust” report by the Pembina Institute

Booming social problems

When mine closures result in sudden unemployment and loss of income, social problems often follow. After a series of mine closures in Elliot Lake, Ontario, domestic disturbances tripled, weapons use and demand for social services increased, and student enrolment dropped. In short, the community’s overall wellbeing was “seriously and negatively affected.”³

Booms can also generate social problems, in some cases because of a sudden rise in disposable income. Examples include higher rates of alcohol and drug addiction⁴, youth delinquency and distrust among community members.⁵ Indeed, studies suggest that “drug problems and ... associated social problems in the northern B.C. community of Iskut started about the time Golden Bear [a gold and silver mine] began operations.”⁶

Maintaining a traditional way of life is already a real challenge for many First Nation communities in northern Canada. An influx of workers would make this challenge even more difficult.

Typical mining work schedules can also lead to social problems, especially when many adults in one community work in the same mine. A rotation of two weeks on, one week off, for example, can be stressful. Employees’ need to “let loose” after two weeks of intensive shifts can result in increased rates of drug and alcohol abuse.

Broken ecosystems

Busts sometimes result in bankruptcy for mine operators, and mine sites may be abandoned without being properly shut down and cleaned up. That usually leaves taxpayers to pay for environmental restoration, while local communities deal with pollution in the interim. Canada’s Commissioner of the Environment has referred to abandoned mines as an “ecological time bomb.”⁷

The Yukon territory — home to the abandoned Faro, Giant, Mount Nansen, and Coloma mines — is still dealing with remnants of a bust that took place decades ago on traditional lands of the Dene and Inuit. The federal government never collected enough funds from mining companies to cover

the cleanup and closure of these sites, so hundreds of millions of dollars of work has not been completed. For example, the abandoned Giant Mine left behind 237,000 tonnes of toxic arsenic, which will need to be managed forever.

This problem is not unique to the Yukon. The Britannia Mine, an abandoned site near Squamish, B.C., will cost almost \$100 million to clean up. Boom times are no guarantee of effective environmental stewardship, either. The mining industry in B.C. spends less than 1% of revenues on environmental management.

Sources:

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