

## How a proposed pulp-mill discharge pipe is tearing a Nova Scotia town apart

[By Jessica Leeder, Atlantic bureau chief, \*The Globe and Mail\*, Wednesday, Dec 19, 2018](#)

*The pulp and paper mill in Pictou, N.S., wants to build an effluent pipeline that has galvanized the region's fishermen in opposition. But as workers fear their jobs are in jeopardy, tensions are rising and the struggle has spilled over into the courts*

**Pictou, Nova Scotia**--Dawn breaks as fisherman Ryan MacDonald stands on Mike Noel's lobster boat while joining a blockade in Pictou Harbour, N.S., on Nov. 19. For months, Pictou has seen a standoff between the blockade boats and a survey vessel contracted by a pulp and paper mill that wants to build an effluent pipeline in the area. They coax their engines awake and the smell of wafting diesel begins to compete with the salt of the sea.

One after the other, the boats putt past the breakwall and signs for the ferry to Prince Edward Island and motor east toward Pictou Harbour in wait for the rogue's approach. When a vessel contracted to do survey work by the local pulp and paper mill, Northern Pulp, appears, a water-borne sprint begins in order to encircle it and block its course; engines are cut and the fishing crews toss round orange buoys and ropes overboard to gum up the waters. Insults are hurled and the RCMP look on from shore. When it is clear the survey boat's task is doomed, a male voice comes over the radio from its cabin and asks, in a resigned tone, for permission to retreat. The fishermen draw back; a pair of boats escort the survey vessel back to shore. The surveyors will try again on the next clear morning, and they will be defeated once again.

The pulp mill's survey is part of the company's environmental research for its plan to build a pipe that would discharge between 70-million and 90-million litres a day of treated effluent from the mill into the Northumberland Strait, a prized fishing ground.

Opposition to that plan has galvanized Gulf of St. Lawrence fishermen from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI, where more than 7,000 people rely on harvesting lobster, herring, mackerel and bluefin tuna for their living. It has also united those groups with local environmental advocates whose decades-long goal has been holding the mill to account on the effects of its waste. The unintended effect of this union, though, is extreme tension blooming between fishing families and those at the mill who fear they will lose their jobs if the fishermen succeed in preventing construction of the effluent pipe.

In Pictou, the same frigid, predawn scene between the survey and fishing boats has been playing out for months. The town is filled with people who will tell you things have never felt so grim: Cars have been scratched, threats have been made, police are on high alert. "We are a community right now that has real anxiety," said Sean Fraser, the Liberal Member of Parliament for Central Nova, which includes Pictou. "People are nervous for their livelihood on both sides."

Signs in shouting-red all-caps are plastered in shops along town streets, in the windows of quaint houses with gingerbread trim and nailed to trees: “NO PIPE! NO PULP WASTE IN OUR WATER!” The retorts, printed in black and white, snark back “YES PIPE!!!,” though mostly from a safe distance across Pictou Harbour, inside the confines of Northern Pulp. The controversial mill has been a fixture here on the northern shore of Nova Scotia since 1967.

The mill has always had opposition – the province has spent more than \$100-million to support the mill and keep jobs secure despite environmental concerns – but discontent has never been so widespread. The pipe dispute has ballooned into a polarizing conflict that seems to have ensnared everyone in town (and some far beyond – the Nova Scotia-born actress Ellen Page has waded in on Twitter).

On Tuesday afternoon, a Halifax judge granted Northern Pulp a temporary injunction to prevent fishermen from continuing to block the company’s survey work. The mill says its pipe plan is necessary for operations to continue after 2020, the deadline Nova Scotia’s provincial government legislated in 2015 for the closing of Boat Harbour, the effluent dumping site where the mill has funnelled its treated waste since the 1960s, adjacent to Pictou Landing First Nation.

The Indigenous community lost its use of the historic fishing ground nearby as a result of contamination at Boat Harbour. The provincial Environment Minister referred to it last year as one of the worst examples of “environmental racism.” Cleaning it up is projected to cost taxpayers at least \$133-million.

Fishermen and environmental advocates argue that replacing Boat Harbour with a new discharge pipe in the strait poses too high a risk to marine life and the jobs spread across three provinces that rely on it, from fishing to tourism. The area’s lobster market alone is worth more than \$400-million, according to 2017 statistics from the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. But Northern Pulp, via company spokesperson Kathy Cloutier, has said there is no better option. She told a local newspaper earlier this year that “essentially no pipe equals no mill.”

Disagreement over which industry has right of way on the path forward has pitted mill and forestry workers against fishermen, First Nations, environmentalists and the tourism sector. It is cleaving families, neighbours and lifelong friendships – in other words, all of the tight-knit relationships that form the backbone of small-town life. If there is any middle ground, it is that everyone is weary, wary and racked with uncertainty.

“The common denominator here is that no one wants to lose their job. Everyone is just trying to put bread and butter on their table, and it breaks my heart,” said Karla MacFarlane, the provincial Progressive Conservative MLA. “We can put a man on the moon. Surely we’re going to be able to find a solution.”

Several leaders, including Pictou’s Mayor Jim Ryan, Ms. MacFarlane and Nova Scotia Senator Dan Christmas are calling for the federal government, via the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA), to conduct its own assessment of the mill’s plan. While the province has jurisdiction, once Northern Pulp tables its official pipe plan (the company says it intends to file those in January), the federal department has confirmed that the CEAA will

conduct its own analysis and decide whether to recommend a full environmental assessment to Minister of Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna.

Mr. Christmas said federal involvement is essential to deal with “perceived conflicts of interest.” Those include apparent ties between the mill and the provincial government, each of which currently has employees or contractors that have, at one time, been employed by the other.

“There is a perception [that a provincial environmental assessment alone] would lack credibility and integrity,” Mr. Christmas said. “The worst thing we can do is leave this hanging and leave a divisive atmosphere.”

Federal involvement would give the community confidence “that the decision would be fair, impartial and in the best interest of all involved,” he said, adding: “To me, that’s worth gold.”

It wasn’t until recently here that folks needed to worry about what they wore to the Sobeys or Walmart. While nobody is concerned about dressing fancy in this rural Nova Scotia town, those who used to toss on a hat or jacket embroidered with the words “Northern Pulp” now pause before going out the door. Most choose to wear something else.

“You don’t want to get into an argument with somebody about how you’re poisoning your environment or you’re killing your neighbours,” said Mark McLaughlin, a mechanical worker who has been at the mill for 15 years and whose family has worked in the woods for three generations. “We all have kids. We’re not out to poison the community or the waterways,” he said. “We are all just employees. It’s good jobs ... in an area where you see many people heading out west for work.”

More than 200 people in and around Pictou are directly employed by the mill, and another 500 to 1,000 forestry workers rely on its operation for their jobs. Their status in the community has shrunk as local opposition to the mill – and its future – continues to build.

Mill workers say they are now pariahs here. “Many people feel like they’re being looked down upon by their neighbours,” said Mr. McLaughlin, a father of four who says some of his co-workers have resigned to keep lower profiles.

As a result, their voices have nearly disappeared from public discourse around the most pivotal issue to grip the region in more than 50 years. Worries of those who fear for their pensions or defaulting on mortgages and truck loans are shared only among workers, some of whose children now come home from school anxious. The kids pay for their families’ mill-related status on the playground and in the classroom, where some have felt shamed during teachers’ discussions about the mill and its environmental risks. No workers were willing to speak on the record about this.

The contribution of mill workers to Pictou, Mr. McLaughlin said, seems forgotten by the general public, which benefits when employees buy snow tires locally or raise money for minor hockey and 4-H. “It’s just a group of people that ... want to work here and make a good life,” said Mr. McLaughlin, standing in front of a hallway bulletin board featuring a handwritten ad for homemade beets, relish and mustard pickles (\$6).

“This is not a demon mill.”

Ryan MacDonald is a fisherman and a Red Seal-certified tradesman who has learned to repair just about anything – from frayed ropes to complex machinery – with his hands. What he cannot fix is the chasm that has opened up between his family, which shifted decades ago from working in Nova Scotia’s woods to fishing its waters, and their long-time neighbour, who committed those same decades to his job at Northern Pulp. “That neighbour has known me for 34 years and will not wave at me now,” Mr. MacDonald said. “We’ve been pitted against each other. That’s what this has gone to. And it’s not going to come back. But I’m standing up for what I believe in.”

Mr. MacDonald is one of several dozen fishermen who kept their boats in the waters off Pictou long past fishing season this fall and used them to block the survey boat hired by the pulp mill from doing its work. “We’re not trying to put them out of work,” he says of the mill’s employees. “We’re not after workers with three kids and a mortgage and a car payment,” said Mr. MacDonald, who has a three-year-old and a baby on the way in January. “We’re trying to protect our jobs and the environment for the future,” he said. “This is going to create divisions between family and friends that can never be repaired.”

His position has caused ripples inside his family, too. While Mr. MacDonald’s father fishes, he has two uncles who work in forestry, including one at a company with contracts at the mill. Formerly regular Sunday visits have tapered off. “I just don’t stop by any more,” Mr. MacDonald said, adding: “I don’t want to see anybody go poor. But fishermen can’t take 100 per cent of the risk.”