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COALITION AGAINST THE MINING PANDEMIC

# North America Regional Synthesis Report





Collective research and advocacy on the intersection of mining and the COVID-19 pandemic.

### About the coalition

The Coalition Against the Mining Pandemic works in global solidarity with communities, Indigenous Peoples, and workers to respond to mining abuses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We work as a consensus-based coalition conducting collective research and advocacy on the intersection of mining and the COVID-19 pandemic.

### About this report

This report analyzes the mining industry's operations in North America over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic to date, with a particular focus on the Canadian context. Drawing from an analysis of over fifty news articles, and academic literature and phone interviews, it highlights the social and environmental impacts of these operations on local communities and seeks to bring to light regulatory changes introduced under the cover of the pandemic.

### Acknowledgements

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Boreal forest in Treaty 9 territory.

Credit: Kerrie Blaise.

## Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic in North America, there has been a significant **deepening** of the **racist and colonial power asymmetry** between mining companies and communities. Companies have seized upon the pandemic moment to **circumvent mandatory consultation processes** and **violate the rights of Indigenous communities**, including by pushing ahead with controversial Environmental Impact Assessments and rolling back agreed-upon and legislated environmental protections, all during a period when community monitoring capacity has been stretched. **Governments** have exacerbated this imbalance, spending billions of dollars directly and indirectly in subsidizing controversial mining projects, even in the face of community opposition.

Moreover, we find that **states and companies** have worked together to **make sure mining continues throughout the pandemic**, creating **significant and unnecessary health risks** for workers and communities alike. Even in the face of serious community concerns, governments in Canada and the United States were quick to designate mining as an **“essential service”** during the pandemic. (Quebec was an initial exception, although it also ended up granting the “essential” designation to mining companies a month after other Canadian jurisdictions had done so.) Several major COVID-19 outbreaks, affecting thousands of people, have been traced to mine sites in Canada. Many mines in the region employ a **fly-in, fly-out** workforce, adding to the risk of COVID-19 transmission to and from population centres in the South.

We also highlight how the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for companies and governments to further entrench the mining sector

in public consciousness by arguing that the sector is key to **post-pandemic economic recovery**. These arguments are frequently built on the tenuous claim that mined minerals will contribute to the **“green energy transition”**, even as mining projects continue to unleash considerable environmental damage.

Finally, it is also important to highlight how **community resistance** has secured significant wins. In Nunavut (Canada), workers were sent home with pay for multiple months after members of one mining-affected community blocked the mine’s access road to demand better health and safety protections in the early days of the pandemic state of emergency. Land defenders continue to adapt and care for one another and the planet, despite the challenges of the times.



Photo: Boreal forest in Treaty 9 territory.  
Credit: Kerrie Blaise.



## Introduction

This report analyzes the mining industry's operations in North America over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its goal is to highlight the social and environmental impacts of these operations, with a particular focus on regulatory changes and on how mining during the pandemic has affected communities (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and workers.

This work is the product of a global collaboration between researchers and communities, self-organized into transcontinental hubs, seeking to document dimensions of the mining-pandemic nexus around the world. Because all the collaborators on the North America report are based in Canada, we devote most of our attention here to analyzing the Canadian context. That said, we also broaden our analysis by highlighting examples and trends from the United

States where relevant. Our conclusions are derived from an analysis of over fifty news articles about mining operations in the region during the pandemic.

The report begins with a brief survey of mining industry operations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada and the United States. It proceeds to develop four core findings about these operations, elucidating these findings with examples from two controversial mining projects: the Ring of Fire development in Ontario, Canada and the Whale Tail Mine in Nunavut, Canada. To provide readers with deeper and more contextualized reporting on these two sites of struggle, longer overviews of each project's operations are available as standalone reports at [miningpandemic.org](http://miningpandemic.org).

### The core findings of this regional report are as follows:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a significant deepening of racist and colonial power asymmetries between mining companies and communities, giving mining companies new opportunities to push through unpopular projects by violating and rolling back environmental protections. Companies' actions are bolstered by direct and indirect support from governments, who have often been active partners in perpetuating this violence. Governments have ignored their government-to-government obligations to Indigenous peoples under treaties, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), negotiated agreements, or (in the case of Canada) the Canadian Constitution.
2. States and companies have worked together to make sure mining continues throughout the pandemic, creating significant and unnecessary health risks for workers and communities alike.
3. The pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for companies and governments to further entrench the mining sector in the public consciousness by arguing that the sector is key to post-pandemic economic recovery. In several cases, these arguments are built on the tenuous claim that mined minerals will contribute to the "green transition".
4. Community resistance has persisted despite the additional barriers posed by the pandemic. This resistance has secured some significant wins, including improvements to companies' health and safety protocols.

## Regional Overview

Price Waterhouse Coopers' 2021 report on the global mining industry notes that "by any important measure, mining is one of the few industries that emerged from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic economic crisis in excellent financial and operational shape."<sup>1</sup> The industry's North American operations are no exception to this trend. Skyrocketing metal prices have led to the Canadian mining industry accumulating "significant" profits over the course of the pandemic,<sup>2</sup> while the US mining industry reportedly accumulated revenues of over \$13 billion USD in 2021 alone.<sup>3</sup> These figures stand in contrast to the predominant industry narrative from the early months of the pandemic, which cried that pandemic restrictions and uncertainties were causing companies to lose revenue.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile governments across Canada, where mining is regulated provincially, were quick to designate mining as an "essential service" so it could continue operating even when other industries were under public health lockdown.<sup>5</sup> The province of Quebec was an initial exception, but by April 2020 it too had granted this designation to the industry.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, meanwhile, mineworkers were designated as "essential critical infrastructure workers" by the Department of Homeland Security in March 2020.<sup>7</sup>

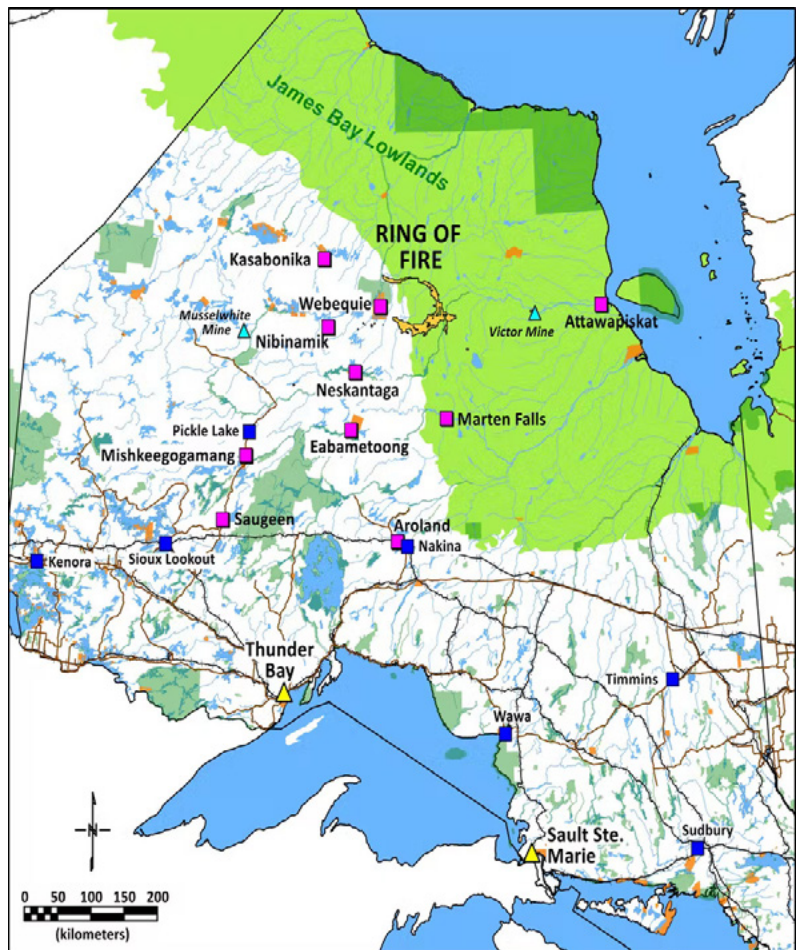


Photo: Map of the Ring of Fire region. Credit: Noront Resources.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pwc.com/ca/en/industries/mining/canadian-mine-2021.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statista.com/outlook/io/mining-quarrying/united-states>

<sup>4</sup> <https://mining.ca/resources/reports/pandemic-action-summaries-from-mac-members-june-25-2020/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.millerthomson.com/en/publications/communiqués-et-mises-à-jour/mining-bulletin/april-7-2020-mining/impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-canadian-mining-industry/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1693636/mines-reprise-activites-essentielles-coronavirus>; <https://www.quebec.ca/nouvelles/actualites/details/pandemie-de-covid-19-le-secteur-minier-est-ajoute-a-la-liste-des-activites-et-services-prioritaires>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mining-technology.com/news/miners-deemed-essential-to-us-covid-19-response/>

## Cases Documented

This report illustrates its main findings with reference to two prominent and controversial mining projects: the Ring of Fire development in Ontario, Canada and the Whale Tail Mine in Nunavut, Canada.

The Ring of Fire is a deposit of chromite, nickel, platinum, and other minerals located on Treaty 9 territory in northern Ontario. Currently in the exploration and permitting stage, mining and exploration activities on this deposit affect the territories of over a dozen Indigenous nations. This project has been in development for over a decade and remains controversial; a number of nations have expressed their disapproval of plans for mining in the area,<sup>8</sup> and the deposit sits underneath the world's second-largest peatland complex, a major carbon sink.<sup>9</sup> The provincial government, whose Premier previously declared he would “jump on a bulldozer” to jumpstart extraction, has pushed ahead with environmental impact assessments and permitting processes even though multiple Indigenous nations have declared moratoriums on environmental assessment and licencing processes for mining and exploration for the duration of the pandemic; they

highlight that the health crisis has stretched their capacity and they are thus not able to meaningfully participate in such processes at this time.<sup>10</sup> Analyst Riley Yesno of the Yellowhead Institute argues that governments and companies have collaborated here to “weaponize[e] the health crisis” in pushing through this project.<sup>11</sup>

The Whale Tail mine is a gold mine owned and operated by Agnico Eagle in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, Canada. It is 110km north of the nearest community, Baker Lake. Whale Tail is in production, and extraction has continued throughout the pandemic. The Whale Tail case offers a clear example of a company seizing on the pandemic to roll back environmental regulations it had previously agreed to follow, as Agnico Eagle unilaterally stopped following rules to protect local caribou populations - protections which local Inuit had cited as essential if they were to support the project. In doing so, Agnico Eagle has also violated its legal obligation to consult with a specially created body of community representatives from territorial and Inuit civil society organizations.

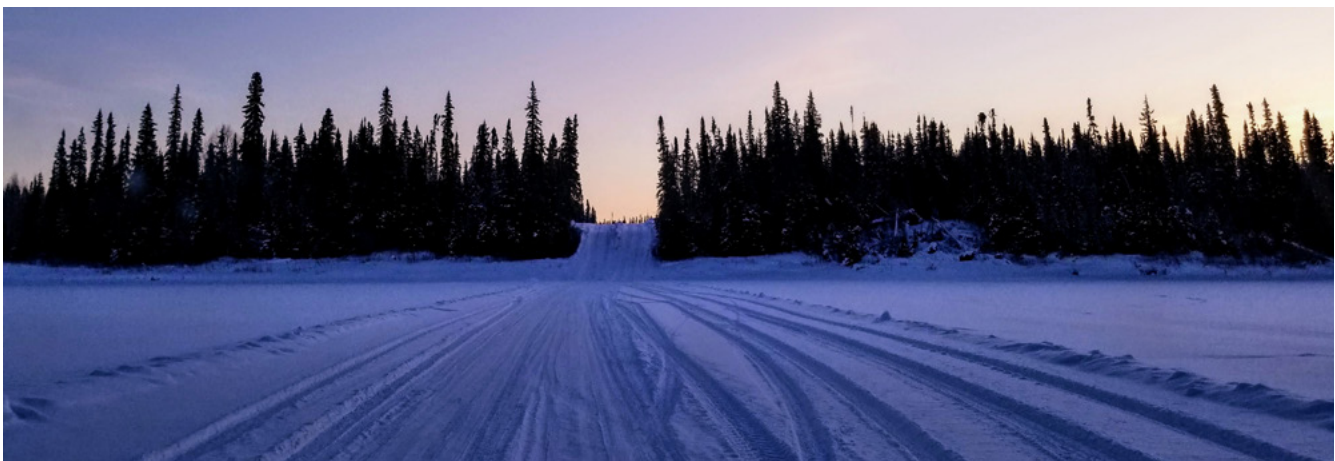


Photo: Boreal forest in Treaty 9 territory. Credit: Kerrie Blaise.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/01/20/first-nations-chiefs-concerned-with-ring-of-fire-process.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://thenarwhal.ca/ring-of-fire-ontario-peatlands-carbon-climate/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://theconversation.com/will-debt-liability-and-indigenous-action-see-the-sun-set-on-the-ring-of-fire-169311>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/first-nation-consultation-covid-1.5761963>

## Findings

1. *The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a significant deepening of racist and colonial power asymmetries between mining companies and communities, giving mining companies new opportunities to push through unpopular projects by violating and rolling back environmental protections. Companies' actions are bolstered by direct and indirect support from governments, who have often been active partners in perpetuating this violence. Governments have ignored their government-to-government obligations to Indigenous peoples under treaties, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), negotiated agreements, or (in the case of Canada) the Canadian Constitution.*

It is no secret that mining operations in North America follow racist and colonial logics. Mining companies, with the support of the colonial state's legal frameworks, stake off large portions of Indigenous nations' sovereign territory and irreversibly alter local ecosystems.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, communities' right to consultation and self-determination, already insufficiently respected prior to COVID-19, has been even further eroded over the course of the pandemic. At a time when a number of communities have publicly stated that their decision-making institutions are already operating at maximum capacity in order to survive the realities of COVID-19, a dangerous pattern has emerged: companies, often with the support of governments, are seizing this moment to illicitly roll back environmental protections and push through unpopular mining projects.

In the **Ring of Fire**, governments and companies have taken advantage of communities' restricted organizing capacity, using the pandemic as an opportunity to advance a controversial project despite significant opposition. From the earliest months of the pandemic, the government has introduced regulatory changes that benefit mining companies at the expense of communities. When pandemic lockdowns were first being announced in March 2020, Ontario declared mining to be an "essential service" and passed "extension of time" and "exclusion of time" policies which granted companies up to an additional year to conduct work on a mining claim.<sup>13</sup> Communities were given no extra time to submit comments to environmental impact assessments.<sup>14</sup> These measures directly contravened guidance from Ontario's Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, which advised "delay[ing] or defer[ing] non-urgent projects that impact First Nations treaty rights during the pandemic".<sup>15</sup> Exploration work in the area, meanwhile, has been destructive, with the use of heavy machinery and drilling technologies that cause lasting damage to local ecosystems.<sup>16</sup>

Only a few months later, the disproportionate power held by mining companies was again bolstered when provincial government introduced the 'COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act'.<sup>17</sup> The act introduced dramatic changes to the environmental impact assessment process, with lawyer Kate Kempton describing it to CBC News as "gut[ting] the Environmental Assessment Act...remov[ing] a

12 <https://redpaper.yellowheadinstitute.org/>

13 [http://www.geologyontario.mndm.gov.on.ca/mines/lands/policies/extension\\_of\\_time\\_policy\\_e.html](http://www.geologyontario.mndm.gov.on.ca/mines/lands/policies/extension_of_time_policy_e.html); [http://www.geologyontario.mndm.gov.on.ca/mines/lands/policies/exclusion\\_of\\_time\\_policy\\_e.html](http://www.geologyontario.mndm.gov.on.ca/mines/lands/policies/exclusion_of_time_policy_e.html);

14 <https://cela.ca/mining-injustice-exploration-decision-making-community-voices-in-ring-of-fire/>

15 Internal memo, reported by CBC News: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/first-nation-consultation-covid-1.5761963>; <https://cela.ca/northern-services-project-brings-community-concerns-to-ottawa/>

16 <https://wildlandsleague.org/news/new-photos-reveal-extensive-damage-done-by-ring-of-fire-mining-exploration/>

17 <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-42/session-1/bill-197>



bunch of protections.”<sup>18</sup> Several Indigenous nations prepared a legal challenge to the law. Chief Sheldon Oskineegish, of Nibinamik First Nation, argued that the government was “attempting to use the COVID-19 global pandemic as a smokescreen to ignore their constitutional duties to First Nations”.<sup>19</sup>

The direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities have also played an important role in deepening existing power asymmetries and increasing the relative power of mining companies; the effects of ongoing colonial violence have also worsened the impacts of COVID-19 in Indigenous communities and have made responding to these crises much more complicated. For instance, three communities affected by Ring of Fire exploration are under boil water advisories, and many communities are grappling with the decades-long legacy of government under-investment in housing, which makes social distancing and quarantine nearly impossible.<sup>20</sup> Chief Chris Moonias of Neskantaga

First Nation noted in April 2020 that his nation was “overstretched and exhausted” in their efforts to navigate these intersecting crises, all while the government was changing the rules to favour mining companies.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the federal and Ontario governments have continued to push forward with environmental impact assessments in the Ring of Fire, even as communities, for the reasons described above, made it clear they do not have capacity to meaningfully participate in these processes under current circumstances. In October 2020, despite the ongoing pandemic (and the recent evacuation of Neskantaga First Nation, which had discovered an “oily sheen” in their water supply),<sup>22</sup> the provincial government posted proposals for disruptive exploration work and supply road construction, giving only 30 days for affected communities to respond.<sup>23</sup> In the permitting process for the supply road, the government signed agreements with only two affected First Nations,



Photo: Black spruce trees marking a crossing on the winter road on the James Bay coast. Credit: Kerrie Blaise.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/bill-197-first-nations-1.5712623>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/09/systemic-inequities-increase-covid-19-risk-indigenous-people-canada>; <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/neskantaga-urging-ottawa-to-help-protect-community-from-omicron-variant/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/first-nations-mining-permits-ontario-covid19-1.5550033>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1620925418298/1620925434679>; <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/neskantaga-urging-ottawa-to-help-protect-community-from-omicron-variant/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://cela.ca/mining-injustice-exploration-decision-making-community-voices-in-ring-of-fire/>



leaving leadership of other nations to express “alarm”, “shock” and “disappointment”.<sup>24</sup> By November 2021 the province had introduced new legislation to remove environmental protections from land in the Ring of Fire and make it easier to push through road construction.<sup>25</sup> Beyond this legislative circumvention of Indigenous sovereignty, the provincial government has also provided millions of dollars of direct and indirect funding to Ring of Fire exploration projects, as well as proposing a joint framework with the federal government to cover the cost of the \$1.6 billion supply road.<sup>26</sup>

In continuing with exploration, assessment, and permitting activities, companies and governments are taking advantage of their power in the pandemic moment to directly contravene the rights of the Indigenous nations on whose sovereign territories mining is taking place. As early as January 2021 the Mushkegowuk Council, representing seven affected Indigenous Nations in the region, had called for a moratorium on Ring of Fire development and assessment processes.<sup>27</sup> As of February 2022, environmental impact assessments and exploration activities continue.

In **Baker Lake, Nunavut**, communities have also had to grapple with the deepening of racist and colonial power asymmetries during the pandemic. Here, Agnico Eagle has taken advantage of stretched community monitoring capacity to unilaterally roll

back the important environmental provisions it had agreed to as a precondition for its operations. When the company announced its plans to open the Whale Tail mine, local community members expressed serious concerns that the heavy equipment traffic on the haul road leading to the mine would disrupt caribou migration patterns, as this traffic creates significant amounts of noise and dust.<sup>28</sup> On this basis, the Whale Tail mine’s EIA stipulated that the company must work to ensure “zero harm” to caribou.<sup>29</sup> The company agreed to respect 64 caribou-protecting restrictions on the mine’s daily and seasonal operations, including the closure of the haul road during caribou migration season.<sup>30</sup> The company further agreed that it would not alter any of these environmental protection measures without the prior consent of a “Terrestrial Advisory Group” (TAG) made up of representatives from the Kivalliq Inuit Association (a regional governance authority), the Government of Nunavut, and the local Baker Lake Hunters and Trappers Association.<sup>31</sup>

However, with the capacity of these local governance institutions stretched by the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, Agnico Eagle has stopped respecting key environmental protections in an attempt to increase their profits. While Agnico Eagle boasts of its “sensitive” response to the pandemic, “unit[ing]... employees, communities and stakeholders”,<sup>32</sup> many of its actions in the Kivalliq region have been anything but. Soon after the onset of pandemic restrictions

24 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/northern-link-road-enviro-assessment-1.5838738>

25 <https://www.torys.com/our-latest-thinking/publications/2021/11/ring-of-fire-development-gets-a-fresh-push>

26 <https://theconversation.com/will-debt-liability-and-indigenous-action-see-the-sun-set-on-the-ring-of-fire-169311>

27 <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/01/13/mushkegowuk-chiefs-call-for-moratorium-on-ring-of-fire-development.html>

28 Government of Nunavut submission to Nunavut Impact Review Board, “RE: Comment Request for Agnico Eagle Mine’s Meadowbank and Whale Tail Project 2020 Annual Report”, June 25, 2021; [https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674nunavut\\_board\\_says\\_yes\\_to\\_agnico\\_eagles\\_whale\\_tail\\_gold\\_mine/](https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674nunavut_board_says_yes_to_agnico_eagles_whale_tail_gold_mine/)

29 Nunavut Impact Review Board, 2017, Vol 2, pp. 225, cited in Bernauer, Warren, “Undermining Environmental Impact Assessment: Environmental Advisory Groups and Extractive Industries in Nunavut, Canada”, Draft Research Paper, December 17, 2021.

30 Government of Nunavut response to Agnico Eagle Annual Report (2020); [https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674nunavut\\_board\\_says\\_yes\\_to\\_agnico\\_eagles\\_whale\\_tail\\_gold\\_mine/](https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674nunavut_board_says_yes_to_agnico_eagles_whale_tail_gold_mine/)

31 *Ibid.*

32 <https://www.agnicoeagle.com/English/sustainability/our-covid-19-response/default.aspx>



Photo: Baker Lake, Nunavut in autumn. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

in the spring of 2020, the company began to argue that mandatory environmental protections were “too costly” and needed to be loosened.<sup>33</sup> Without first “appropriately consulting” the Terrestrial Advisory Group, it attempted to weaken road closure requirements, in part by increasing the number of caribou that trigger road closures and only closing the road if a very large number of caribou was spotted nearby. These unilateral changes were criticized by all members of the TAG, who argued that Agnico had violated the terms and conditions of its project certificate. In response to these criticisms, Agnico retracted the changes to caribou protections, and indicated that it would discuss the issue with the TAG before proceeding.

However, Agnico Eagle still managed to unilaterally relax caribou protection measures during the 2020-2021 season. The company avoided fully implementing protection measures for over 22,000

migrating caribou by designating them “project tolerant” and arguing that they were not being disturbed by mining operations - even though over 95% of these caribou had not yet actually been shown to have crossed the road.<sup>34</sup> This designation was applied without prior discussion with the TAG.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, even prior to these relaxed protections, local community members had observed significant disruptions to caribou migration, with elder Joan Scottie noting that “Many hunters were coming home empty handed, even though they would drive more than 80 kilometres out of town looking for caribou.”<sup>36</sup> A 2020 report from the Government of Nunavut’s Department of Environment provides further evidence of disrupted caribou migration. This report used satellite collar data to analyze caribou movements and found that the access road has both delayed and deflected migration.<sup>37</sup> As of 2021, Agnico Eagle has acknowledged concerns about

<sup>33</sup> <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/agnico-eagle-tries-to-ease-caribou-protection-measures-for-nunavut-mine/>

<sup>34</sup> Bernauer, “Undermining Environmental Impact Assessment”.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/game-changer/>

<sup>37</sup> Boulanger et al, “Kivalliq Caribou Monitoring Program - Analysis of Caribou Movements Relative to Meadowbank Mine and Roads During Spring Migration,” *Nunavut Wildlife Research Trust Final Report, Department of Environment, Technical Report Series – No:01-2020, July 31, 2020.*

caribou protection and committed to re-visit these with the Terrestrial Advisory Group; however, there is still reason for sustained concern given the company's recent track record of acting unilaterally even while claiming to consult the TAG, and the fact that TAG members are facing serious capacity limits during the pandemic.

Agnico Eagle and other mining companies operating in the territory further benefitted from direct government intervention to protect their profits during the pandemic. In 2020, citing the economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government waived annual mineral lease fees on crown land in Nunavut (worth a reported \$1.5 million).<sup>38</sup>

Of course, this state-supported deepening of unequal power relations is not limited to Ontario and Nunavut. From Canada's Northwest Territories – where a member of the territorial legislative assembly has gone public with allegations that the government's COVID-19 recovery meetings with the Chamber of Mines “evolved into lobbying efforts with limited public accountability”<sup>39</sup> – to Nevada, USA, where the state government has continued to issue mining permits during the pandemic despite pushback from capacity-stretched civil society,<sup>40</sup> these dangerous trends have proliferated throughout much of the continent and demand close scrutiny.

The above examples illustrate the worrisome pattern at play in North America: the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened racist and colonial power asymmetries between mining companies and communities. The pandemic has stretched community capacity, a reality that companies have seized upon to circumvent mandatory consultation processes and push through

unpopular projects. Meanwhile, governments have tended to worsen this imbalance by designating mining as “essential” and providing generous direct and indirect financial support to mining companies going forward with projects in the face of community opposition.

2. *States and companies have worked together to make sure mining continues throughout the pandemic, creating significant and unnecessary health risks for workers and communities alike.*

In March 2020, jurisdictions across North America rapidly allowed mines to continue operating even as they declared public health lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This prioritization of mining has since continued despite the serious and multifaceted threats it poses to the health of community members. Sandra Oolooyuk, a Nunavut resident interviewed by Nunatsiaq News in March 2020, spoke to the crux of the matter when she asked:

...if anyone can explain to me how the Agnico Eagle Mine in Rankin Inlet and Baker Lake, Nunavut, is an essential service? They are flying people in and out every day to pull gold out. That gold will still be there tomorrow, next week, next month, even next year. No amount of gold or money would replace a loved one if they pass away from COVID-19.<sup>41</sup>

The predominance of “fly-in, fly out” workforces in much of the North American mining sector further underscores the need to take COVID-19 transmission from mining extremely seriously: workers who become infected onsite can rapidly spread the virus

38 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/annual-mineral-leases-waived-by-feds-in-nunavut-1.5689441>

39 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/advocating-lobbying-covid-recovery-mines-1.6126915>

40 <https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/publications/emailarchive/viewemail.php?email=Take%20Action%3A%20Stop%20Nevada%20From%20Pushing%20Out%20Mining%20Permits%20During%20COVID-192020-03-20T23%3A00%3A58%2000%3A00>

41 <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/to-prevent-covid-19-agnico-eagle-will-let-nunavut-workers-go-home/>; quoted in <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8583534/#B70-ijerph-18-11266>



to other locations, and remote communities located near these mines face heightened risks of harm from COVID-19 due to the concentration of health services in faraway urban centres and to disproportionate rates of pre-existing health conditions in these areas. Indeed, at least three outbreaks of COVID-19 in Canada have occurred at mines since March 2020: at the Lac des Iles palladium mine in Northern Ontario, the Brucejack mine in Northern British Columbia, and the Mary River mine in Nunavut.<sup>42</sup> These outbreaks have directly killed at least three people while infecting hundreds of others, including dozens of people in Indigenous communities. Moreover, even while some companies have implemented new health and safety measures at their worksites, outbreaks have



Photo: Mary River Mine. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

still occurred throughout the pandemic.<sup>43</sup> The Mary River mine outbreak alone saw over 100 workers test positive on-site. 1200 workers were then flown home to communities across Canada, causing hundreds of confirmed infections and likely many additional infections not captured by contact tracing, as per reporting by the Toronto Star.<sup>44</sup> Comparable data on the US context has not yet been published, but the Canadian examples suffice to prove the significant dangers associated with continuing to prioritize mining during the pandemic.

Additional health risks have also been created, linked to the impacts of mining on local landscapes – and these in turn are compounded by the health risks posed by COVID-19 transmission. In Baker Lake, for instance, Agnico Eagle’s violation of agreed-upon environmental regulations threatens to shift the migration pathways of local caribou populations, as detailed above. At a time where the community already faces risks from COVID-19, community-members have reported additional health impacts from losing access to caribou. These include impacts to holistic health, recognizing that land-based knowledge and cultural practices are an important component of health, and an increase in food insecurity.

All said, prioritizing mining during the pandemic has come at significant cost to human health, both in terms of COVID-19 transmission and compounding health impacts caused by mining activities themselves. Governments’ decisions to designate mining as “essential” and facilitate resource extraction throughout the pandemic are political decisions with impacts that are all too often devastating.

42 Nora Loreto, “Deaths in Residential Care in Canada by Facility,” [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1M\\_Rz0jK0vWF-9nAozl7aoyLpPU8EA1JEqO6rq0g1iebU/edit#gid=404463485](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1M_Rz0jK0vWF-9nAozl7aoyLpPU8EA1JEqO6rq0g1iebU/edit#gid=404463485). Mining workplace deaths have been reported among workers at the following mines: Brucejack (British Columbia), Lac des Iles (Ontario), and Mary River (Nunavut).

43 For more information on the Lac des Iles Palladium outbreak, see the June 2020 COVID-mining snapshot report: [https://miningwatch.ca/sites/default/files/covid-19\\_and\\_mining\\_-\\_snapshot\\_report.pdf](https://miningwatch.ca/sites/default/files/covid-19_and_mining_-_snapshot_report.pdf).

44 [https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/06/12/how-a-massive-outbreak-at-nunavuts-baffinland-mine-sent-sparks-of-the-delta-variant-across-the-country.html?rf&utm\\_source=Twitter&utm\\_medium=SocialMedia&utm\\_campaign=SportsHockey&utm\\_content=massiveoutbreaknunavut](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/06/12/how-a-massive-outbreak-at-nunavuts-baffinland-mine-sent-sparks-of-the-delta-variant-across-the-country.html?rf&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=SocialMedia&utm_campaign=SportsHockey&utm_content=massiveoutbreaknunavut)

3. *The pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for companies and governments to further entrench the mining sector in the public consciousness by arguing that the sector is key to post-pandemic economic recovery and sidelining alternatives. In several cases, these arguments are built on the tenuous claim that mined minerals will contribute to the “green transition”.*

As part and parcel of making sure mining continues in the short term, despite its toll on people’s health, states and companies have worked throughout the pandemic to promote mining as an important part of countries’ post-pandemic recovery and long-term prosperity. In this way, the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity to further entrench the extractives sector in how people think about the economy, and to marginalize alternatives to extractivism.

In **Canada**, the federal government created an Industry Strategy Council of representatives from across the private sector to guide its COVID-19 recovery policies.<sup>45</sup> The council’s first report listed mining among Canada’s “resources of the future” and argued that the country should make efforts to “grow an economic, commercial-scale critical materials supply chain (e.g., rare earth elements, nickel) required for many new technologies (e.g., electric vehicles...)”.<sup>46</sup> While of course it is true that many renewable energy technologies are built with mined materials, affected communities and allied organizations have increasingly emphasized that this push for more extraction creates additional environmental damage at the local level and often

obscures anti-extractivist alternatives like addressing overconsumption and waste, and scaling up mineral recycling.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the use of “critical materials” and “green transition” framings to position mining as an essential activity obscures the fact that non-transition and non-essential minerals like gold have continued to make up a significant part of total mining activity in Canada during the pandemic.<sup>48</sup>

In practice, such framings have continued to be deployed by companies and governments to present mining as a long-term imperative for which it is worth sacrificing other considerations. A strong example of this trend can be seen in the Ring of Fire, where the government of Ontario justified its scaling back of regional environmental protections in November 2021 by arguing that the new law was necessary to position Ontario as a supplier for the growing electric vehicle industry.<sup>49</sup>

Similar examples can be found across the **United States**. For instance, Canadian company *Lithium Americas* has pushed forward with the Peehee Mu’huh (“Thacker Pass”) lithium project during the pandemic, despite opposition from members of Northern Paiute and Western Shoshone Indigenous nations on whose territory the project is being planned. The company has argued that its project will contribute to securing lithium for US electric vehicle production in the context of pandemic-induced supply chain instability.<sup>50</sup> On December 2, 2021, local land defenders announced legal action against the federal Bureau of Land Management for expediting the permitting of the mine and failing to consult Indigenous communities.<sup>51</sup> Peehee Mu’huh is sacred

45 <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-science-economic-development/news/2020/06/minister-bains-announces-members-of-new-industry-strategy-council.html>

46 <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/062.nsf/eng/00118.html#s-2.1>

47 [https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/Post-Extractivist\\_Transition\\_WEB\\_0.pdf](https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/Post-Extractivist_Transition_WEB_0.pdf); [https://miningwatch.ca/sites/default/files/informe\\_mapeoderesistencias.pdf](https://miningwatch.ca/sites/default/files/informe_mapeoderesistencias.pdf)

48 <https://www.pwc.com/ca/en/industries/mining/canadian-mine-2021.html>

49 <https://www.torys.com/our-latest-thinking/publications/2021/11/ring-of-fire-development-gets-a-fresh-push>

50 <http://www.sierranevadaally.org/2021/04/28/lithium-americas-ceo-explains-the-benefits-of-the-thacker-pass-lithium-project/>

51 <https://www.protectthackerpass.org/press-release-new-legal-claims-filed-against-thacker-pass-lithium-mine/>

land, and is also the site of an 1865 massacre at which U.S. Cavalry killed between 31 and 70 Paiute men.<sup>52</sup>

4. *Community resistance has persisted despite the additional barriers posed by the pandemic. This resistance has secured some significant wins, including improvements to companies' health and safety protocols.*

Continued community resistance is a vital part of the mining-pandemic story. Across the continent, land defenders have been steadily adapting to the challenges of the times and finding new ways to protect one another and the planet. From PeeHee Mu'huh to Nunavut, people have continued to organize, and have adapted their measures to incorporate social distancing and other forms of community care.

Even in the face of all the challenges highlighted here, local activism has secured some major wins. For instance, communities in Nunavut successfully organized to add a layer of protection against the risk of COVID-19 transmission from fly-in, fly-out mineworkers. In March 2020, one week after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, residents of Rankin Inlet blocked the road connecting their community to Agnico-Eagle's nearby Meliadine gold mine, citing fears of viral transmission from the mine's fly-in staff.<sup>53</sup> In response, Agnico Eagle announced it would send home Nunavut-based employees from all of its mines, including Whale Tail, for a four-week period with pay.<sup>54</sup> This reversed its statement from just three days prior to the blockade, when the company's vice-president

of Nunavut Operations declared it was "essential" for all workers to remain on-site.<sup>55</sup> The company also announced it would bar fly-in staff from leaving the mine site to visit nearby Inuit communities.<sup>56</sup> These policies ended up being extended for a 15-month period, until the Government of Nunavut approved the return of Nunavut-based employees to work in June 2021.<sup>57</sup> Workers were sent back home with pay as another wave of COVID-19 hit Nunavut in December 2021.<sup>58</sup>

Agnico-Eagle soon began to spin this policy as an example of good corporate social responsibility – even as skyrocketing gold prices led the Nunavut mining sector to earn \$500 million more in mineral production than it had in the previous year.<sup>59</sup> But since the company was actively violating environmental protocols at the Whale Tail Mine, and given that some members of mining-affected communities in the territory continued to question why the mines were still extracting metals during a pandemic in the first place, the victory remains significant.

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52 *Ibid.*

53 <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/nunavut-community-blocks-access-to-gold-mine-over-covid-19-fears/>;

54 <https://www.miningnewsnorth.com/story/2020/03/20/northern-neighbors/agnico-sends-nunavummiut-home-with-pay/6217.html>

55 <https://www.nnsi.com/nunavut-news/agnico-eagle-forges-ahead-despite-covid-19-risk-introduces-screening-of-employees/>

56 <https://www.mining.com/agnico-eagle-shares-drop-as-covid-19-cases-rise-in-nunavut/>

57 <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/agnico-eagle-okd-to-bring-back-nunavut-workers/>

58 <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/agnico-sends-nunavut-miners-home-amid-13-covid-19-cases/>

59 <https://www.nunavutnews.com/opinion/from-the-chamber-of-mines-tough-year-for-mineral-exploration-and-mining-in-nunavut-northwest-territories/>



## Conclusions

Surveying the North American context with a focus on Canada, we find a number of significant interconnections between mining industry operations and the COVID-19 pandemic; connections which have often persisted or deepened since the first cases of the virus were reported on the continent over two years ago. These connections include the significant deepening of racist and colonial power asymmetries between mining companies and communities; a pattern of collaboration between states and companies to make sure mining continues throughout the pandemic, despite the health risks this poses; the window of opportunity provided by the pandemic to further entrench the mining sector in the public consciousness; and the admirable persistence and adaptation of community resistance, which has secured some major wins.

The pandemic has been weaponized to further the interests of the mining industry and its allies in government. Arundhati Roy highlights how pandemics, historically, “have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.”<sup>60</sup> While many of the ways that the mining industry has navigated the COVID-19 pandemic thus far seem to suggest the opposite – an acceleration of existing crises – Roy’s point stands, and this new world is being modelled by land defenders globally. What would it mean to follow their lead and build a post-pandemic world that prioritizes care, human rights, and protecting the environment?

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

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