

Nalcor Energy VP tells Muskrat Falls Inquiry he was 'not happy' with emails about project split

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Nalcor Energy executive vice-president Gilbert Bennett at the Muskrat Falls Inquiry in St. John's on Tuesday. - Joe Gibbons

Gilbert Bennett testifies about director's communications to independent engineer

ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — A step below the Nalcor Energy CEO, executive vice-president Gilbert Bennett has been the corporation's lead on the Muskrat Falls project, and in July 2016 he was openly criticized by his project director in emails to the Government of Canada's independent engineer.

Project director Paul Harrington wrote to independent engineer Nik Argirov about the plans for bifurcation — splitting of the project into two (transmission and generation). It meant changes to internal project management.

"This was cooked up by Gilbert and John MacIsaac," Harrington wrote in an email in evidence at the Muskrat Falls Inquiry.

Harrington has testified the point of the split wasn't well explained and not something he agreed with.

"Gilbert came to talk with me on this yesterday but it was already a done deal and I was not going to be caught giving that as a validation of their work so I politely declined and told Gilbert he has to take responsibility of the consequences of this and the way it was done," he wrote to Argirov as it was happening. "The team are disheartened and demotivated as a result of the lack of respect shown to me and others. I really worry about the impact this will have and I don't think the P75 cost will cover it."

There were other emails between Harrington and the man responsible for reporting to the federal government. At another point, in 2018, at the time of an event at the Soldiers Pond converter station to mark first power to the island over the Labrador-Island Link, Harrington disapproved of a lack of invites for certain people. He stated in an email, "Shame on Nalcor."

On the stand at the inquiry Tuesday, Bennett was diplomatic when asked about the exchanges.

"I try not to do that myself and I don't think it's really necessary," he said, speaking generally on not using formal business language.

He added he relies on individual judgment.

"And my message to the team is consistently, whenever we're writing emails, it's a good idea to make sure you've thought those through carefully before you hit send."

Commissioner Richard LeBlanc stepped in during the questioning by Geoff Budden, lawyer for the Concerned Citizens' Coalition, to press on the subject.

He asked why Bennett wasn't reacting more to Harrington's comments, "basically, I think, lambasting the reputation or the abilities of Nalcor."

Bennett had described Harrington as conveying risk associated with the change in the project's management under new CEO Stan Marshall, but LeBlanc suggested what Harrington wrote went further. He said Harrington offered personal views not consistent with the views and needs of the company.

"I'm not happy with what was said in the email," Bennett said.

He said he didn't approve of it, and did talk to the project director.

On the bifurcation, he said his own position was the project was being split, the decision was made and the project team members just needed to proceed.

"They did eventually get over it," he said.

Bennett continues to work with Harrington, with Harrington communicating with the independent engineer.

"I've never tried to insert myself into the conversation to say I want to take control of the conversation with the independent engineer because that creates another set of problems," he said.

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