

Arctic research station a 'toxic ghost town'

Key Northwest Passage complex left to rot, says U of A researcher

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The federal government has left a research station rotting at the western entrance of the fabled Northwest Passage, say scientists who describe it as a national, and possibly toxic, disgrace.

A dark, dank two-storey complex, nearly new when Environment Canada walked away in 1997, has become a giant incubator for mould. Old fuel drums are buried underground. Dilapidated trucks, and a vintage snowmobile, are lined up as if they'll one day roar back to life.

"It's basically a toxic ghost town," says noted University of Alberta polar researcher John England, who is appalled at the state of the remote outpost abandoned by the federal government 12 years ago.

He says a few million dollars a year could have maintained the base on Prince Patrick Island, which is at a key location in the western Arctic. Instead, the region is now more isolated than ever, with the federal government cutting logistics support for people venturing into the area. The Mould Bay base is in such a sorry state the buildings are no longer fit for human habitation and the site will likely cost tens to hundreds of millions of dollars to clean up, say England and his colleagues.

"It's a travesty," says England, who has spent 40 years exploring the Arctic Archipelago and has helped rewrite the geological and glacial history of the region.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's northern strategy lists protecting the Arctic environment as a priority, but government documents show a planned "decommissioning" of Mould Bay has been repeatedly put off. The big federal push now is for construction, with \$85 million to be spent over the next two years refurbishing and expanding "key" Arctic research stations and another \$2 million to plan a "world-class" High Arctic research station, expected to cost well over \$100 million.

Canada and the U.S. originally established the Mould Bay outpost in 1948 as part of a network of High Arctic weather stations. It was also a prime location for asserting Canadian sovereignty during the Cold War, and is ideally located for patrols. "You take off at the end of the runway in Mould Bay and in minutes you're over the middle of Northwest Passage," says England.

"It appears they just walked away," says geologist Roy Coulthard, who has been doing field work on Prince Patrick Island since 2004. His University of Alberta team has passed through Mould Bay several times.

Environment Canada hoped the 1997 exit would not be permanent. Then in 2002 a decision was made to close it and \$8 million was allocated in 2003 for the "decommissioning" of Mould Bay and another Arctic weather station. But the decommissioning was delayed and, according to a July 2008 federal report, \$7.3 million of the \$8 million allocated for the clean up "cannot be accounted for."