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Former CanWhite employee alleges well contamination, lax site safety

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CanWhite Sands Corp. allowed machine oil to leak into a well, ran an unsafe jobsite, and greenwashed its motives for coming to the RM of Springfield, a former employee alleges.

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Vivian resident Mark Wowchuk says his conscience and concern for the public good are prompting him to speak out about what he witnessed during his seven months with the Calgary-based mining company, which wants to extract and process underground silica sand deposits located east of Anola and ship them by rail to market.

According to regulators, the project is designed to produce over 1.3 million tonnes of silica sand per year. Critics of the project claim it will harm the Sandilands aquifer that supplies the entire Southeast region with drinking water. CanWhite maintains its proprietary slurry extraction method is safe and that its processing plant will be a boon to the local economy.



Brent Bullen, CanWhite's chief operating officer, disputes Wowchuk's account, calling numerous details "fabricated."

In an interview last month, Wowchuk said he doesn't identify as an activist and

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isn't affiliated with advocacy groups opposed to the Vivian Sand Project.

Wowchuk said he feels a heightened sense of responsibility because he lives in Vivian.

His proximity to the company's testing sites off Provincial Road 302 south of Highway 15 factored into his decision to join CanWhite in March 2019. At the time, he was its only full-time Manitoba employee.

An industrial mechanic with a background in mining, manufacturing, and management, Wowchuk was working as a facility maintenance supervisor at CN's Symington Yard when a headhunting firm recruited him to become CanWhite's operations manager.

Wowchuk said he knew that joining a startup was risky but took the job because he has "a love for mining" and believed a silica plant could be good for the region, creating jobs and spinoff businesses.

"It's a great opportunity, it just needs to be done correctly, morally and ethically," he said.

Wowchuk reported directly to Brent Bullen—the public face of the company in Manitoba—but said he wasn't privy to CanWhite's discussions with government.

CanWhite's Environment Act Proposals—one for extraction, one for processing—are currently before the Manitoba government. The Impact Assessment Agency of Canada is also deciding whether to designate the project under the Impact Assessment Act.

Wowchuk served as a bridge between CanWhite executives in Alberta and contractors in Manitoba. Wowchuk said CanWhite CEO Feisal Somji told him he would be “the face of Manitoba” for the company as it ramped up test drilling and data collection around Vivian.

Wowchuk was given a company truck and keys to an office space in Oakbank. He also joined the local chamber of commerce. But by mid-May, he was noticing red flags. He eventually concluded the company's public presentation didn't align with its conduct onsite.

INJURIES AND LONG SHIFTS

Wowchuk said his previous employers all had “a strong safety culture.” Arriving at CanWhite, he found the site safety “really subpar.”

Wowchuk said the use of personal protective equipment in active work areas was “nil to non-existent.” Bullen, he said, sometimes walked around in designer dress shoes and only occasionally wore a hard hat and safety

glasses. Wowchuk recalled instances when ear plugs weren't supplied to visitors and respirators weren't donned around silica, whose fine particles can, over time, cause lung damage.

"The only thing that seemed to matter was sand out of the ground," Wowchuk said.

He provided a photo he said he took in August 2019 showing three CanWhite employees walking on site. One is wearing shorts and socks with flip-flops. A second is wearing jeans, rubber boots, and a hard hat. A third is wearing jeans, work boots, and a ball cap.

In a phone interview this week, Bullen said he spent about 50 days in Manitoba in 2019, mostly in the summer and fall, and consistently wore PPE in active work areas, taking it off only when ducking inside a portable office trailer.

He said the company purchased and provided PPE to workers onsite, and would "never, ever allow" someone in an active work zone without it.

"We actually have a lot of pride in how we operate," Bullen said.

Site work began in June 2019. Wowchuk said three injuries occurred on the first day, none were reported to Workplace Safety and Health. One of those injuries was Wowchuk himself, who clipped his

thumb while fitting a collar onto a pipe. Wowchuk said no one offered to drive him to the hospital.

“I had to do first aid on myself.”

Bullen recalled the injury but said it didn't rise to the level of a reportable incident and was treated with an ice pack. He added the company would never deny leave to an injured worker in need of medical attention.

Bullen said CanWhite logged one reportable injury in 2020—a cement splash that required an eye flush—and none in 2019. He said the company also passed all safety inspections.

A Manitoba government database contained no Workplace Safety and Health stop work orders, penalties, or convictions associated with CanWhite Sands. The company had no Workers Compensation Board claims in 2019, a provincial spokesperson said in an email.

Wowchuk said he regrets not conveying his safety concerns to the Manitoba government.

“Should I have? Definitely.”



Bullen said Wowchuk was “writing a complaint list of things that were under his own control to fix.”

Wowchuk said dynamics on site made it clear he was operations manager “in name only,” with site culture and major decisions set by Bullen and his associates. Wowchuk said he also feared speaking out could cost him his job.

Wowchuk also said employees and contractors routinely worked shifts of 16 hours or more, without proper breaks, for up to 20 days in a row. He recalled one backhoe operator who worked a 21-hour shift.

Wowchuk said he found the normalizing of long shifts unacceptable and attributed it to “an oilfield mentality that really concerned me.”

Wowchuk said Bullen often spoke of the importance of workplace safety publicly but in private would deflect responsibility onto others.

“He will put blame on people,” Wowchuk said. “I’ve never once seen him take responsibility for anything.”

WELL CONTAMINATION

While drilling test wells, Wowchuk said wood and PVC pipes sometimes broke apart. The debris couldn’t be retrieved and was left underground. Bullen said only one PVC pipe separated and was later fished out.

Wowchuk also recounted an alleged incident in early summer in which oil leaked from an air compressor and into a borehole at the company’s Centre Line Road testing site. The water level was about 20 feet below the surface.

“When you lifted off the top of the wellhead, you could just see a shimmer down there, and we put down a sounding wake or something and it came up full of oil, and that’s when we took a sample,” Wowchuk said.

Wowchuk said both Bullen and Somji were onsite when the oil contamination happened. Wowchuk said he was instructed not to send the sample for analysis because it could have negative ramifications for the company.

During an interview, he produced a small plastic bottle containing what he said was a water sample taken from the

affected well. Globbs of yellow oil floated on the surface.

“That oil came from the air compressor that we were using onsite,” Wowchuk said.

He called the contaminated sample “a smoking gun.”

“If that’s my drinking water? Hard pass,” he said. “It’s my water, it’s my neighbour’s water. You can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

Wowchuk said a filter was later installed on the compressor to prevent future leaks.

Asked about the incident, Bullen said water samples were analyzed and showed no contamination.

“We have samples that went through proper sourcing, chain of custody, and testing,” Bullen said.

He cast doubt on the validity of Wowchuk’s sample.

“Having hearsay on a water sample two years after the fact—I mean, God knows he could just fabricate his own water sample in a garage and whatever he wants to it at this stage.”

Wowchuk said CanWhite should have used an oilless compressor, or ensured it had a filter.

Wowchuk also stated chlorine was added to water being returned to the aquifer. Bullen said the practice is a statutory requirement for well abandonment in Manitoba.

MARKET POTENTIAL

CanWhite has often pointed to the broad market potential for silica sand, from glassmaking to industrial coatings to the green energy sector.

Wowchuk said during his time with the company, the sand was intended for use in the North Dakota fracking industry. Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, involves injecting water, sand and chemicals underground to recover gas and oil trapped in shale rock.

While preparing for public presentations in the spring of 2019, Wowchuk said he was coached to divert attention away from fracking and play up greener uses of silica sand.

He now accuses CanWhite of misleading the public by “portraying themselves as green” while pursuing oil and gas companies behind closed doors.



Bullen said CanWhite has “no interest” in fracking, calling it “the lowest-margin application you can put this sand into.” He added CanWhite has already signed memorandums of understanding with companies in the electronics and “high-end industrial” sectors.

LABOUR SOURCING

CanWhite has often touted its use of local contractors. Bullen listed Friesen Drillers, Diamond Construction and Gravel, and Nelson River Construction, and estimated CanWhite has already “spent over \$10 million locally.”

But Wowchuk said many times the company chose not to use local labour, even when it seemed cheaper and easier.

“It was all Alberta people,” Wowchuk said.

He recalled how CanWhite flew in Alberta-based heavy equipment operators and housed them in Winnipeg

hotels. He couldn't understand why the company would ignore the cheaper and easier option of local operators.

Bullen said CanWhite only brought in Alberta labourers when specialized expertise and experience with proprietary equipment couldn't be found locally.

Wowchuk also said CanWhite's Oakbank offices largely sat empty.

"It's like they wanted to be undercover, but it's pretty hard to do that when you're drilling," he said.

EXTRACTION DOUBTS

Wowchuk said he has "grave concerns" about CanWhite's extraction method that the company's open houses haven't dispelled.

Wowchuk said the method he saw used—sending compressed air down and sand and water up—failed to produce a consistent volume of sand and left him doubtful about the whole enterprise. He also found it odd that the company hadn't taken any core samples.

"I was under the understanding and the impression that the science had already been done, that they had an extraction method, that is was tried and proven," Wowchuk said.

Bullen said the extraction method was “at the infancy stage” in 2019, and was refined after Wowchuk’s departure. The method was tested this summer and “absolutely” works, he added.

“We’re in a position where we’re able to proceed once we get approvals.”

Wowchuk’s job also involved liaising with Manitoba Hydro, who told him the Vivian power station doesn’t have the capacity needed to run a large processing plant. Bullen said Manitoba Hydro will upgrade the station at CanWhite’s expense.

Wowchuk said Somji told him he has no intention of operating the facility once it’s built. Wowchuk said Somji doesn’t want the responsibility of managing a plant from two provinces away.

Bullen disagreed, saying the company will to operate the plant and create 100 direct jobs.

He said a peer-reviewed hydrogeological study commissioned by the company and published this summer gave the company “a green checkmark to proceed.”

PARTING WAYS

Wowchuk said he shared his concerns about CanWhite with Springfield Mayor Tiffany Fell in August 2019. He provided a screenshot of a text exchange with

Fell's phone number to back up the claim.

Wowchuk said Fell reacted by contacting Friesen Drillers and meeting with Bullen and Somji, but also said she wanted CanWhite to succeed.

Two months later, in a letter dated Oct. 18, Wowchuk's employment was terminated "without cause."

Wowchuk said Somji summoned him to a downtown Winnipeg hotel the day before. Sensing what was coming, he brought all of his company gear along. Wowchuk was told he was being let go because the company was running out of money, but he believes it's because CanWhite learned he had spoken to Fell.

Bullen said he couldn't discuss the reasons for a termination, citing confidentiality and employment law.

In a phone interview this week, Fell recalled "multiple meetings" with Wowchuk to discuss his concerns.

Fell said she told Wowchuk that municipal officials were powerless to stop exploratory drilling because mining is the provincial government's jurisdiction. She urged him to take his concerns to provincial regulators.

Fell said she shared Wowchuk's concerns with council, but not with Bullen.



Springfield council's stance on the Vivian Sand Project has evolved over time. Early on, council adopted a wait and see approach.

"We want to make sure that it's looked at from an evidence-based, independent perspective," Fell explained.

Two months ago, council issued a statement expressing "significant concerns and questions" about CanWhite's extraction method. Fell said council now wants a Clean Environment Commission hearing. Fell said council believes water is "extremely important" and deserves protection.

Wowchuk attributed council's new stance to the approaching municipal general election next year.

"She certainly wasn't asking a lot of questions at the beginning."

Fell said council was waiting to see CanWhite's regulatory submissions before speaking out.

Springfield council issued a brief statement following Fell's phone interview.

"Similar to any other unique business opportunity, it is not uncommon for Council and staff to correspond with representatives of a business to allow both sides to perform their due diligence on a proposal brought forward. Questions and concerns from Council and Staff were directed to CanWhite Sands for a response on multiple occasions," the statement read in part.

Bullen said Vivian's proximity to rail lines makes it the company's preferred site, but said two other local RMs have also expressed interest in the plant.

"We like the Springfield facility for a lot of reasons, but we do have options if that doesn't move ahead."

LOOKING AHEAD

Wowchuk's allegations arrive as CanWhite is ramping up its public relations efforts. The company has uploaded a video series called "Facts Matter" to YouTube over the past month. Bullen said the videos are an attempt to counter misinformation circulating on social media.

The videos, which have garnered about 350 combined views to date, feature on-camera interviews with Bullen discussing

topics like extraction, aquifers, wells, economic development, and community involvement.

Bullen says in one video that the company wants to extract less than five percent of Manitoba's sand deposits.

"We do not do damage. We do not hurt the aquifer. The aquifer can actually sustain the activity that we're looking at," he adds.

Bullen said in an interview that a polling company hired by CanWhite found local support for the project is growing.

Wowchuk maintains local residents are opposed to the project, and blames CanWhite for not being more forthright during its arrival in Manitoba.

"If you don't tell people what's happening, what they make up is worse," he observed.

Wowchuk said CanWhite also needs to listen to environmental activists, even those who extrapolate beyond the facts.

Bullen said CanWhite hopes for a response from government regulators by the end of the year.

"We respect and adhere to the process and procedures, and we'll deal with the rulings as they come."

Wowchuk said checks and balances are critical, adding government must be dispassionate in its analysis.

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