

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, when Canada designated the metals buried beneath vast, remote peat bogs in Treaty No. 9 territory in Northern Ontario as “critical minerals,” it sparked a mining frenzy. There are now over 31,000 mining claims in the Ring of Fire, with some companies in hot pursuit of nickel to build electric vehicle (EV) batteries.¹

The Ontario government is positioning the province as the home of a continuous supply chain for EV batteries. Their hope is that by securing Indigenous consent for mining in the North and massively subsidizing battery factories in the South, the difficult and dirty middle links of the supply chain—like extraction, transportation, and refining—will become inevitable.

With a particular focus on nickel, this report takes readers through the steps of the EV battery supply chain, from mineral exploration to the production of batteries. Our research reveals significant gaps in the Ontario government’s vision of a fully integrated domestic supply chain, most importantly a lack of recognition of the jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples and their capacity to provide or withhold consent to activities on their territories. Multiple Treaty No. 9 First Nations have made themselves clear: “No Ring of Fire mining without consent.”²

We also discuss uncertainties about supplying the new gigafactories, the volume and origins of raw materials required, the location of their processing and refining, and the associated distribution of social and environmental inequities along these supply chains. Despite optimistic government assumptions, there is no guarantee that Canadian batteries will end up in cars manufactured in Canada and contain minerals mined in Canada. Moreover, with massive scales of extraction deemed necessary, it’s important to evaluate the environmental promises used to justify these activities.

We then turn to the Australian-owned mining company Wyloo, which plans to build a mine on one of the biggest nickel deposits in the Ring of Fire, called Eagle’s Nest. Wyloo has pledged to build a first-of-its-kind net-zero emissions mine with a minimal environmental footprint.

1. Sarah Law, “Mining Claims Have Jumped 30% in Northern Ontario’s Ring of Fire Area Since 2022,” CBC News, December 11, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/ring-of-fire-mining-claims-rise-1.7051094>.

2. Jessica Smith Cross, “No Ring of Fire Mining Without Consent, First Nations Alliance Demands,” Northern Ontario Business, July 21, 2023, <https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/regional-news/far-north-ring-of-fire/no-ring-of-fire-mining-without-consent-first-nations-alliance-demands-7305162>.

This report scrutinizes some of Wyloo’s claims, comparing them to reality.



CLAIM: Eagle’s Nest will have a small footprint, with less than one square kilometre of surface disturbance.

Reality: With new changes to the original plan for Eagle’s Nest, it will be challenging to keep the footprint of the Eagle’s Nest mine as small as Wyloo promises. In addition, the access roads and the mines that will follow—many of them open-pit by necessity—will cause vast cumulative damage to a sensitive peatland ecosystem.



CLAIM: There will be no tailings ponds at Eagle’s Nest. Tailings will be placed in the voids left underground after removing ore, in a process called “paste backfill.”

Reality: Storing toxic and reactive waste underground can be dangerous—and there’s been little research on the long-term behaviour of paste backfill in cold weather. Plus, the tailings—once mixed with concrete—are larger than the ore that was removed from the ground. This means that the company will need to mine more in order to make space to return all the waste underground.



CLAIMS: Through investigating the use of electric vehicles at site, wind power, and carbon capture and storage (CCS) in tailings, Eagle’s Nest will be a net-zero emissions mine.

Reality: Wyloo’s claims about building a net-zero mine lack important detail and verification. Their plan to use CCS in tailings relies on assumptions about future technologies deployed at a massive scale. It’s also unclear if the company is including upstream emissions from inputs like concrete and downstream emissions from smelting in their net-zero calculations—if they aren’t, their pledge falls catastrophically short of true net zero.



We conclude that Wyloo’s claims amount to greenwashing—primarily, because many of their claims are misleading, vague, or hypothetical. But also—and perhaps even more importantly—because the Eagle’s Nest mine is a Trojan horse: building it will open up the entire region to mining, with catastrophic impacts to sensitive ecosystems, Canada’s carbon emissions, and Indigenous rights.