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Research Leader says provincial energy institute must push ahead with scientific work in face of setbacks

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FREDERICTON - The interim head of the New Brunswick Energy Institute says its credibility with the public will be determined by the strength of the research it produces in the wake of a second resignation from the body's leadership.

David Besner says the institute must push ahead with its scientific work, maintaining that it is independent of government despite conflicting allegations made by the only First Nations member of its scientific advisory council, who has resigned.

The Telegraph-Journal has reported that Fred Metallic, a member of the Listuguj First Nations in Quebec near Campbellton, who holds a PhD in environmental science, resigned from the group, stating he "wasn't comfortable with the level of intervention by the government" in the independent body's work.

Several members of the institute's scientific advisory council stated on Thursday that they disagree, maintaining they wouldn't be part of the independent body if it were indeed being influenced by government.

Meanwhile, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick says it may also pull out of the institute's roundtable group if its voice isn't heard. Spokeswoman Stephanie Merrill said she shares some of the concerns raised by Metallic.

In hopes to start anew, the institute and its scientific advisory council met on Thursday in Fredericton to host an energy roundtable meeting. "I'm a little surprised by the comment from Fred because in all the dealings - and I have talked with him a number of times at length - and in his letter of resignation, he did not refer to that at all," Besner said. "I can honestly say that he never mentioned the issue of government intervention and I'm rather surprised because the board has made and I have made it clear in conversations with the Department of Energy that the board sees itself as an independent agent and continues to do so.

"The government purposely set up the institute to be an independent agency." Metallic's resignation follows controversy surrounding the academic credentials of Louis LaPierre and his subsequent resignation as chairman of the energy institute.

The independent body, meant to provide trusted research on the shale gas industry and other provincial energy projects, is now again facing questions of its credibility.

"I think our credibility will be determined over the coming months by what we produce," Besner said.

He added that the group's focus will continue to be on shale gas.

"This isn't due to any bias from the scientific advisory council, nor emphasize on any directive from the government," he said. "It rather reflects the reality of the fact that shale gas exploration, development, production is an important issue for New Brunswick today.

"The institute's mandate is not to promote one type of energy over another but rather to ensure

PLEASE SEE -**RESEARCH, A2**

Article Continued Below

[See RESEARCH on Page A02](#)

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RESEARCH - A1

that factual information relevant to New Brunswick is made available to all New Brunswickers as well as to the government itself." Metallic told the Telegraph-Journal that he quit the institute's scientific advisory council because it was "too preoccupied" with how the Tory government wanted it to respond to shale gas development.

He added that he thought the institute would take a citizens-based approach to energy development while also addressing aboriginal research issues and concerns, most notably around shale gas exploration.

Metallic claimed it didn't.

"There were some issues," Besner said. "With all the issues going on with First Nations, I'm sure it's a difficult time for Fred.

"The discussions we had were how to engage First Nations in our scientific advisory council considerations. We want to as a board, and that was why he was on the board." He added: "We were trying to move toward that." Besner said the group remains "very interested" in engaging First Nations in the scientific research of energy development and will continue to seek a representative.

"So far we haven't found the way," he said.

Tom Al, a professor in the department of earth sciences at the University of New Brunswick and a member of the institute's scientific advisory council, said on Thursday that government has no influence on the independent body's work.

"Absolutely not," Al said. "There is no question.

"I would leave if that was the case." Advisory council member Karen Kidd, a Canada Research Chair and a professor in the biology department at the University of New Brunswick Saint John, said she doesn't share Metallic's concerns about the institute's independence.

"I have never had any experience like that in this energy institute," she said. "It has always been very clear that we have our own direction, our own mandate, and that we are free to set the research objectives and priority for the energy institute." Kidd added that while a different perception may exist, it's unfounded.

"There is a perception that we have an agenda that we don't," Kidd said. "I wish I understood how we could overcome that perception because it's wrong.

"I think it's just a matter of showing people what we are doing is good for New Brunswick and good for the environment, good for public health, and we are not driven to promote this kind of development." Merrill said on Thursday that the Conservation Council of New Brunswick shares some of the concerns that Metallic has raised and will reconsider its involvement in the institute in the future.

"I know he was concerned with things like the framework and the constitution that were already written and being presented without little to no opportunity to massage that," Merrill said. "I can understand his concerns because I share some of those concerns. I identify with some of the things he said, particularly around still being quite unclear what we are doing." She added: "At a first meeting, it was suggested that we were going to make decisions, we were going to be coming to consensus, but on what and for what and to further what goals, I don't know. I'm here to try to get some of that answered, and our longer-term participation will depend on how that becomes clear." Energy institute executive director Annie Daigle attempted to clarify the body's mandate on Thursday, stating that its direction had been "muddied" of late.

"We are an advisory body to the province of New Brunswick," she said. "We interpret that as meaning to the government and to the residents of New Brunswick.

"We are intended to review and assess environmental, social, economic and health issues that relate to energy." Daigle said the group will focus on the protection of the health of citizens and the natural environment, its research focusing on water supply, waste water treatment, well integrity, and the socioeconomic impacts of energy development.

At Thursday's meeting, the institute heard presentations from NB Power's Michel Losier on the province's energy mix and from Darrell Welles with the Department of Environment on an ongoing air-quality monitoring program independent of the institute.

Daigle said earlier this week that a number of projects that LaPierre said the institute would move ahead with have been shelved indefinitely.

Before resigning, LaPierre said the body was aiming to pioneer a groundwater monitoring system that tests for hydraulic fracturing fluid in the water table at various depths, a cutting-edge technology currently unavailable to regulate shale gas development.

"Things sort of came to a standstill for a month and a half to two months," Daigle said. "We haven't developed any research, we haven't signed any contracts or anything like that, and we haven't put out the request for proposals for that work.

"It is being reviewed by the scientific advisory council. We had some setbacks over the last couple of months, so we are just trying to get back on track." Besner said the institute will seek new research proposals in the near future.