

## Memo

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**To:** Jackie Wells  
**From:** Matthew Gosse  
**cc:** James McCarthy  
**Date:** 17 March 2020  
**Re.** Muskrat Falls Reservoir Methylmercury Monitoring – February 2020 Update

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Dear Ms. Wells,

In order to provide additional monitoring coverage of possible changes in methylmercury concentrations in water during headpond and reservoir formation, the provincial government requested an additional sampling program be implemented by Nalcor. Nalcor provided a program description to government and engaged Wood Environment & Infrastructure Solutions (Wood) to implement the sampling program. This memo provides an update on information regarding the Methylmercury Monitoring program completed to date.

### Methylmercury

Typically, total mercury is monitored for most Environmental Effects Monitoring Programs (EEMs), however, the Muskrat Falls Methylmercury Monitoring Program is specifically designed to monitor methylmercury (total and dissolved) as well as total mercury and various parameters which could affect methylation (i.e. total phosphorus, DOC, and temperature). Methylmercury is the organic form of mercury, which is bioavailable and biomagnifies within the food chain (Mergler et al. 2007, Chen et al. 2014). Health Canada (2004) has published drinking water guidelines for methylmercury, stating that long-term, daily exposure to 0.25 mg/L (250,000 ng/L) of methylmercury can lead to neurological disorders, and have therefore established maximum allowable concentrations in drinking water of 0.001 mg/L (1,000 ng/L).

### Headpond Formation and Reservoir Creation

Headpond formation was initiated again in early February 2017, with the first set of impoundment samples being collected February 6, 2017. The inundation to full supply water level (38.5-39 m elevation) began on August 7, 2019 and was completed on September 5, 2019. Water levels at the time of last reported samples within this summary were approximately 38.8 m elevation, which is considered full supply level.

### Sampling Program Overview

Water sampling began in October 2016, with initial samples being collected before any headpond/reservoir formation began in order to capture nature methylmercury concentration. Headpond formation in February 2017 initiated weekly water sample collection from 11 of the 13 sample locations (Figure 1). Throughout headpond formation, inundation had not affected sample locations N2 and N3, therefore they were omitted from the weekly sampling regime until full reservoir inundation, as per WRMD request.



Figure 1: Map of sampling locations for the Muskrat Falls Methylmercury Monitoring Program

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As per Independent Expert Advisory Committee (IEAC) recommendation, each location is now sampled weekly when water temperatures exceed 6°C. When water temperatures are below 6°C, sampling occurs on a bi-weekly basis unless there is a change in water elevation of the Headpond/reservoir by Nalcor which would re-trigger weekly sampling.

With the completion of reservoir formation in September 2019, samples are currently being collected from all 13 sampling locations, including N2 and N3. All water samples are analysed for total mercury, dissolved methylmercury, and total methylmercury as well as other parameters known to possibly affect methylmercury generation and transport.

### Temporal Trends in Dissolved Methylmercury

To date, over 1,600 water samples have been collected for this monitoring program, with the most recent results collected on February 26, 2020. Within the sites included in this summary, approximately 14% of the measurements are at or below the lab detection limit (0.010 ng/L). These values have been included in all analysis as the detection limit. All methylmercury analysis is completed by AGAT Labs and Flett Research, while all the various inorganic water quality parameters are completed solely by AGAT.

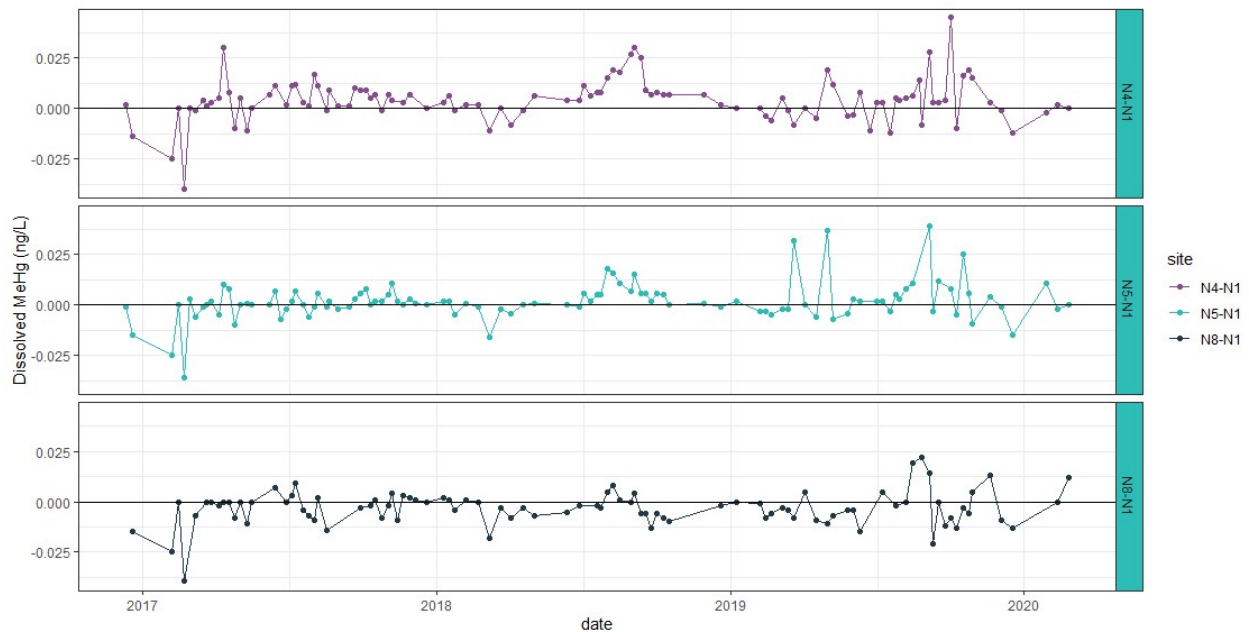
Measured concentrations of dissolved methylmercury throughout the sampling area have typically been low, with less than 1% of the measurements exceeding 0.050 ng/L, and a maximum measured value of 0.078 ng/L (taken mid water column at N4 on October 1, 2019).

Changes to dissolved methylmercury concentrations at stations within and downriver of the headpond/reservoir have been adjusted for baseline, using the control site (N1), which is located upriver beyond any project influence. Measured values from N4, N5 and N8 have therefore been analyzed to determine any potential increases in dissolved methylmercury within the reservoir and downstream, relative to water above the influence of the Muskrat Falls Reservoir (Table 1; Figure 2). As shown, N4 and N5 have a slight increasing trend relative to N1, while this trend does not appear to continue downstream into Goose Bay (N8).

*Table 1: Summary of mean relative difference from control (Grizzle Rapids site N1) of dissolved methylmercury immediately upriver and downriver of Muskrat Falls (N4 and N5), and Goose Bay (N8)*

Sample Site	Operation Phase					
	Pre Headpond		Headpond		Reservoir	
	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean
N4	2	-0.006 (0.016)	93	0.004 (0.002)	14	0.006 (0.007)
N5	2	-0.008 (0.014)	93	0.002 (0.002)	13	0.002 (0.005)
N8	1	-0.015 (-)	79	-0.003 (0.002)	13	-0.004 (0.005)

Note Pre headpond include samples prior to February 2017; Headpond includes February 2017 to September 6, 2019; Reservoir includes samples post September 6, 2019  
 95% confidence interval of the mean relative difference is presented in brackets  
 n represents the number of paired samples for each site/phase with N1 (control)



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Figure 2: Relative difference from control (Grizzle Rapids site N1) in dissolved methylmercury immediately upriver and downriver of Muskrat Falls (N4 and N5), and Goose Bay (N8)

### Quality Assurance/Quality Control

Blind field duplicates are collected randomly from different sampling locations during each sampling round and sent to the lab for full analysis. Using concentrations from the two replicates, the Relative Percent Difference (RPD) is calculated with the following equation, where A and B represent each replicate:

$$RPD = \frac{|(A - B)|}{[(A + B)/2]} \times 100$$

Analysing field duplicates accounts for field sampling error as well as error associated with laboratory analysis. For field duplicates, an RPD of 30% or less is considered acceptable (Azimuth 2017). An extensive QA/QC sampling round is also completed during the spring of each year, when ice conditions do not allow for the safe collection of all sampling locations.

Throughout 2019, the majority of the RPD values calculated were lower than 30%, with a mean RPD of 17.4% and a maximum RPD of 74.2% (Figure 3). There have been three samples completed in 2020 to date, with a mean RPD of 27.1%, ranging from 0% to 46%.

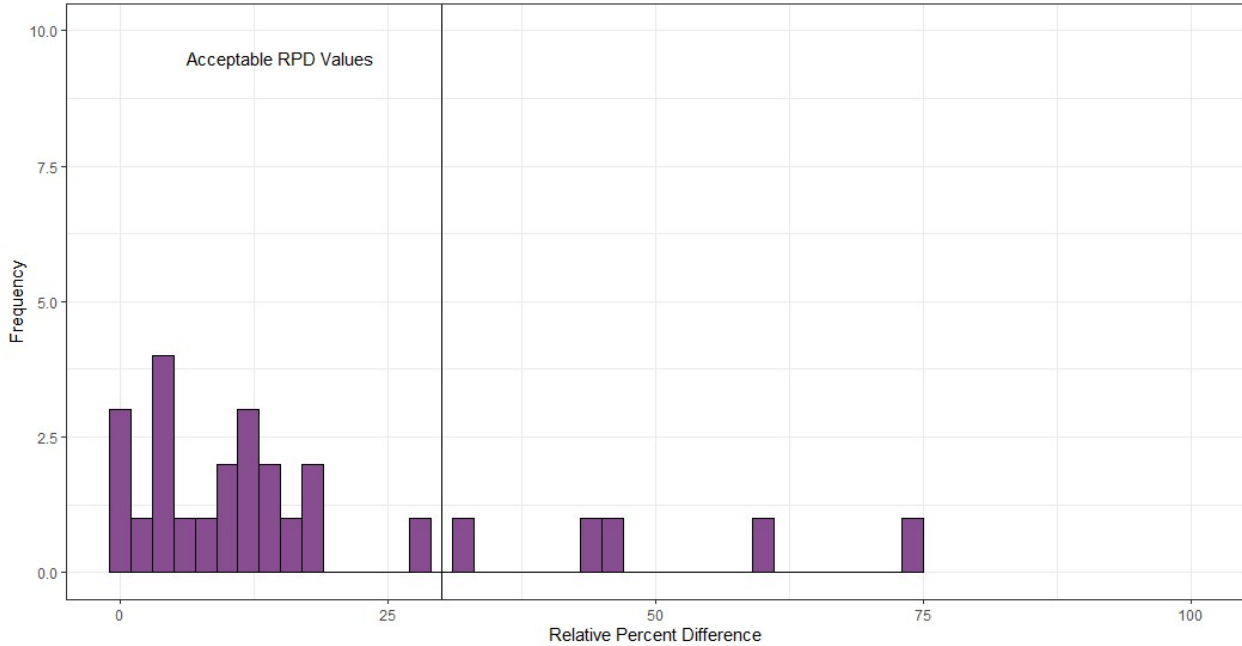


Figure 3: Distribution of RPD values from 2019. Vertical line represents the typical RPD values considered acceptable.

**Closure**

Should you have any questions, comments or concerns regarding the information presented within this summary, please do not hesitate to contact us at your convenience.

Prepared by

Reviewed by

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Biologist

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## References

- Azimuth Consulting Group Partnership. 2017. Relationship between Muskrat Falls Reservoir elevation and mercury concentrations, Lower Churchill River October 2016 - September 2017. Nalcor Energy, St John's, NL.
- Chen, C. Y., M. E. Borsuk, D. M. Bugge, T. Hollweg, P. H. Balcom, D. M. Ward, J. Williams, and R. P. Mason. 2014. Benthic and Pelagic Pathways of Methylmercury Bioaccumulation in Estuarine Food Webs of the Northeast United States. PLoS ONE 9:e89305.
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