

First Nations report says heavy metals from oilsands operations in area wildlife

By Dean Bennett

THE CANADIAN PRESS
EDMONTON—A new study by two Alberta First Nations and University of Manitoba scientists says there is a link between oilsands pollutants and higher levels of heavy metals in wildlife, and higher cancer rates in residents. "There's something unique that is happening in Fort Chipewyan," Stephane McLachlan, the lead researcher from the university, told a news conference Monday.

"It's a situation that is alarming and demands attention."

The report, titled Environmental and Human Health Implications of Athabasca Oil Sands, is the result of three years of research.

It was funded by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and the Mikisew Cree First Nation.

The study says of 94 participants it found 23 cases of cancer.

"Cancer occurrence increased significantly with participant employment in the oilsands and with the increased consumption of traditional foods and locally caught fish," said the report.

It also found total levels of carcinogens in the traditionally hunted foods were higher compared with similar studies around the world.

But it found the dietary intake was low because community members were turning away from the traditional foods in favour of store-bought sustenance.

The methodology combined scientific methods with anecdotal information from community members.

The study also reported generally higher concentrations of industrial heavy metals in moose, duck,

muskrat and beaver.

It reported the arsenic and mercury levels in muskrat, duck, and moose to be of concern to young children.

There were also elevated cadmium levels in moose, beaver, and duck.

It said selenium levels in all wildlife were high enough to be a concern to adults and children alike.

Steve Courtoreille, chief of the Mikisew Cree Nation, said everyone interviewed is concerned about the general decline in health.

"It's time the government does something," said Courtoreille.

"The reality is our people are dying."

Alberta Health Minister Fred Horne was to comment later Monday.

New Democrat critic Rachel Notley said the evidence in the new report cannot be ignored.

"What this report shows is that the reports that preceded have not asked the right questions, are not looking into the right things, and therefore they're shielding the government from taking the responsibility that they need to take," said Notley.

Aboriginals and environmental critics have long sparred with provincial officials over whether pollutants from oilsands operations are seeping and spewing dangerous toxins into the ecosystem.

In March, a study by the Alberta government found that an aboriginal community downstream from the oilsands does not have higher overall cancer rates than the norm.

The Alberta Health Services Survey, using data from 1992 to 2011, did find there was a prevalence of two types of cancer in Fort Chipewyan that were higher than expected.

Bile duct and cervical cancer rates were the two cancers cited in a survey that compared the incidence of 81 cases of 18 different types of cancer.

The survey also noted that most cervical cancer is caused by a virus and that U.S. research suggests tenuous links be-

tween duct cancers and environmental toxins.

Environmental concerns have become a critical factor in expansion of the oilsands.

The U.S. government has withheld approval of the Keystone XL pipeline amid concerns by opponents that it would ensure a re-

liance on the oilsands resource and cause further harm to the environment.

The issue has taken centre stage in Alberta's Progressive Conservative party's leadership race, which will determine the next premier.

Liberal Leader Raj Sherman said the health issue

is intertwined with all other issues when it comes to Canada's international reputation.

"If we don't work with the First Nations to address their concerns, it's going to hurt our bottom line and it's going to continue to hurt good people," said Sherman.