

STUDY OF HUMAN HEALTH IMPACTS IN THE OIL SANDS AREA DENIED FOR DECADES

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By Paul Belanger, Keepers of the Water Science Advisor

As far back as the late 70s, there have been deep concerns regarding severe adverse human health impacts to those living nearby, downstream and downwind of the Alberta tar sands mining sites. As well as from Traditional Knowledge Keepers, with their documentation of negative environmental effects, academic scientists have contributed to the growing chorus of voices raised in reaction to increasing evidence of downstream contamination. But, industry and the Alberta government's actions have obstructed the realization of a human health study in the area.

The 1996 Northern River Basin Study strongly recommended a national call for a health study. Again in 2009, the Alberta Cancer Board Fort Chipewyan cancer report called for human health monitoring and studies. First Nation communities and groups have also called for cancer and health studies about the pollution and toxic elements released in their traditional areas.

After all this, nothing has ever been initiated!

The latest Imperial Oil spill and the Alberta government's reaction again demonstrate how lands and peoples downstream do not matter. Although mounting reports and scientific studies clearly show multiple impacts of oil sands activities to plants, water, land and air, our authorities have yet to address human health impacts and the causes. We see a clear track record of industry and government ignoring information, downplaying health impacts and blocking efforts to initiate a proper human health study. For example, in 2009, the Alberta government insisted that the industry sits on the organizational committee to structure a health study. This request killed this project because other partners wanted an accurate study without the study parameters being flawed by industry.



An undated photo of the site of an overland spill at Imperial Oil's Kearl Lake oilsands mine in northern Alberta. Courtesy: Nick Vardy/Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation

There is a serious concern over the integrity of the Alberta government when supporting a quality independent scientific health study. Consider the recent statements by our current premier, who has downplayed the environmental impacts of the large Kearl, Imperial oil tailings pond spill. We can also recall a callous statement by our previous Fed Minister of Natural Resources, Joe Oliver, ten years ago about the tar sands area: “*The lands downstream are uninhabited.*” We can also recall a denial statement by a former AB minister of Energy, Mel Knight: “*there is no evidence of contribution of degradation downstream from the oil sands.*”

There's truly been an orchestrated, concerted effort for decades to deflect/deny/dodge and dispute the need for a health study and the causes.

Recent science reports and data clearly show the presence of toxins in the Athabasca watershed and massive volumes of harmful volatile gases emitted from the tailing ponds and upgraders. The design of the oil sands tailings ponds is an ongoing problem, and the regulator needs to allow for better and safer tailings pond design. The tailings pond's design, approved by the Alberta Energy Regulator, does not call for a liner and does allow for seepage of tailing liquids in the groundwater below and around each tailings pond.

An engineer whistleblower has recently come forward with some clarification on this point. He was involved in a tailing pond research project. Here are his comments on the tailings pond design:

They don't leak. They're intentionally engineered to drain.

80% of all process water that ends up in tailings ponds (at Suncor) drains out through the geology. They're licensed to do it. There's extensive documentation on it.

It sounds crazy. But ALL the evidence we examined over our five-year study pointed to them intentionally draining as much process water through the underlying geology back into the Athabasca river. But industry gives this a different name. "Recycling."

ALL the evidence. File boxes full of govt and industry reports. All pointed clearly to intentional mass drainage. Every design feature incorporated pointed to drainage. This is primarily as a safety strategy to prevent catastrophic dyke failure. How long would the oil sands industry last if this horrendous truth was known?

This fact dates back to the nineteen sixties. Industry has never been able to reuse the dirty turbid process water. So Gov gave them the authority to dispose of it, drain it back into the river. Then and now. But now they call it recycle.

The above information is from a reliable source who is still afraid to state his name publicly.

Rare cancers have been documented in the Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan areas. Respiratory conditions and asthma are widespread in the First Nation communities and with the oil sand workers.

Keepers of the Water Board of Directors member Dr. John O'Connor, who has practised in the Fort McMurray area for 30 years, is very angry over the decades-long delay in taking action, performing the health study, and mitigating health impacts. Many in the First Nations communities are also angry. This tragic lack of regulatory action and the complicit behaviour by both industry and the Alberta Government has turned the entire oil sand area into a **sacrificial zone**. It is a large-scale example of **environmental racism**.

Keepers of the Water is adding its voice with the Northern communities to call for a comprehensive and independent health study in the oil sands areas and downstream communities.

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