

THE HARPER RECORD

Edited by Teresa Healy



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
CENTRE CANADIEN
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES

www.policyalternatives.ca

Downstream From the Tar Sands, People are Dying

Jessica Kalman

There's deformed pickerel in Lake Athabasca... Pushed-in faces, bulging eyes, humped back, crooked tails...never used to see that. Great big lumps on them...you poke that, it sprays water... A friend caught a jackfish recently with two lower jaws... He had seen deformed jackfish before, but never one with two jaws.

—*Ray Ladouceur, Elder of Fort Chipewyan, Alberta.*¹

THERE IS A massive development occurring in Northwestern Alberta, covering an area the size of the state of Florida. This scale of project has never been seen in Canada before. The Alberta “tar sands” is the single largest industrial development complex in the world. With corporations like Suncor, Syncrude, Shell, Exxon-Mobil and BP getting into the mix, development in the region is at an all-time high, and even more is still to come.

Along with the promise of jobs and a strong dollar, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is promoting the tar sands as the main avenue for Canada to become an international energy superpower, and is pushing Canada even further toward a completely fossil-fuel-based economy. He has even dared to claim Canada can be a “clean energy superpower,” a blatant lie and impossibility when the tar sands, the backbone of his agenda, are in the mix.

As the people who live along the Athabasca River attest, tar sands extraction is far from “clean.” The process emits three times the amount of greenhouse gases as conventional oil extraction, and uses an average of three barrels of water per barrel of oil. The extraction process results in the accumulation of tailings into lakes of toxic sludge, which currently cover 55km² in Northern Alberta. These lakes are so toxic that canyons must be set off and bright orange figures called “Bitu-Men” dot the lakes to prevent bird and wildlife from drinking the sludgy water. Despite these preventive measures, 500 ducks died in one of Syncrude’s “tailing ponds” in April 2008.

Add to this the admission by Suncor that the lakes leach toxins into the groundwater, leading to what Environmental Defence has called “a slow motion oil spill in the region’s river system, [which] may be worse in many respects than the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.”²

All of this development is creating destruction to Albertan and northern Canadian boreal wetlands and wildlife, and it affects the health of the entire Northern ecosystem. In particular, the development of the tar sands has created a life-and-death health crisis for Fort McKay, the Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations community downstream from the major tar sands developments on the Athabasca River.

The community of Fort Chipewyan has reported extremely high incidences of illnesses. In particular, Dr. John O’Connor noticed unusual rates of cholangiocarcinoma, an extremely rare bile duct cancer. He also reported auto-immune diseases, high rates of diabetes, renal failure, hypertension, and other rare types of cancer.³ Since publicly ringing alarm bells in 2001, O’Connor has come under criticism from Health Canada about raising “undue distress” in the community. O’Connor stands by his statements and concerns.⁴

“The elders are saying ‘Why are we burying our children?’ Nobody here can give us answers,” says Chipewyan elder Pat Marcel. “It is speculation to say it’s the water. But for me it’s common sense.”

Lorraine Mercredi, after her cousin and aunt died from digestive cancer, bought a water filtration system.

“It had to have been something from the water, air or land,” says Ivy Simpson, who was only 17 when she contracted cancer. Her cousin has

testicular cancer; her aunt died of uterine cancer, and her sister has terminal cancer.⁵

A recent report written on behalf of the Nunee Health Board Society in Fort Chipewyan found some chemicals with levels that exceed prescribed guidelines at various places and times downstream of the tar sands “digging zone.”⁶ Chemical constituents found in water include arsenic, total phenols and lead.⁷ The risk of adverse health effects from these chemicals is increased for people consuming untreated surface water and eating plants, fish, and other wildlife.⁸

Fort Chipewyan lies 600km north and east of Fort McMurray, the centre of the Athabasca tar sands development. During the spring, summer and autumn months, the community can only be reached by air or water, with winter roads reaching the community as weather allows. The town is located on the south-western tip of Lake Athabasca. The small community of 1,200 has been sounding the alarm for years about the adverse health effects of the tar sands development. Until recently, the community’s residents felt their concerns fell on deaf ears. Even their doctor, Dr. John O’Connor, a hero in the community, was accused of creating panic in the community and was investigated by Health Canada, rather than having his concerns properly addressed.

Since then, both the Athabasca Chipewyan and Mikisew Cree have spoken out and called on the government to address the needs and concerns of the community before any more of their people die. They have been joined by many other groups, who recently met in Fort Chipewyan in August 2008 at the gathering of Keepers of the Water III.⁹

The situation has prompted the community to redouble its political efforts:

On behalf of all citizens of Fort Chipewyan, I am begging for your help in providing the strategic turnaround to stop the destruction that is costing our community so much and that is robbing our children of a future. Those who call Fort Chipewyan and the lands and waters around it home have a sacred responsibility to be keepers of the land and water, and we have a fundamental right to live here and to survive as peoples. Please stand in solidarity with us all and call on your government to say No to new approvals for tar sands and demand that they deal with the

pollution that is killing the people of Fort Chipewyan and the environmental impacts that are destroying our way of life. We need your voice and we need a time-out of the tar sands now!

—Peter Cyprien, *Keepers of the Athabasca Watershed Council, Fort Chipewyan, Alberta.*¹⁰

A legislative firewall around Alberta

In order for Canada to become an “energy superpower,” with the tar sands as its prize, the Harper government has taken preventive steps to ensure that the experience of the National Energy Program of the 1980s is not repeated. To do so, the Harper team has been quietly building a firewall around the tar sands, in collaboration with the oil companies and the Alberta government.

Laws enacted on both a national and provincial level are framed in such a manner as to protect the industry. For example, national greenhouse gas emission legislation initiated under the Harper government in the spring of 2007 requires per-barrel reduction in emissions, but allows the industry to increase its overall emissions, ensuring that industrial growth is not affected. Harper has taken extensive measures to make certain that the “Alberta Agenda” is guaranteed.

Further, while the Alberta and Canadian governments have an obligation to keep mega-industrial projects like the tar sands accountable in terms of their health and environmental impacts, they have largely abdicated this responsibility and opted rather for industry self-regulation. This is particularly true in the case of water contamination. When it comes to monitoring water pollution, the tar sands industry mainly funds and runs the Regional Aquatics Monitoring Group (RAMG). According to independent scientists, RAMG’s monitoring and testing programs are highly questionable. Erratic and inconsistent testing doesn’t allow for proper management of water resources. Both the Mikisew Cree and the Athabasca Chipewyan have withdrawn their participation in RAMG because of its failure to adequately monitor and test the water pollution.¹¹

This is not the first time First Nations health and livelihood have been sacrificed in the name of resource development, nor is it likely to

be the last. Canada has a long and sad history of mistreatment of indigenous peoples, from first contact, to the residential school system, to massive resource development of oil, timber, hydro-dams, and everything in between. Previous national governments have largely failed to rectify past wrongs. Many First Nations communities struggle to access safe drinking water, proper sanitation, and health care.¹² Resource development in many regions has left communities without the environmental integrity to maintain traditional livelihoods.

Stephen Harper has not only failed to right past wrongs, but since becoming Prime Minister, has also abrogated the \$5 billion Kelowna Agreement that was signed between the previous government and First Nations, and has voted against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Further, far from the common and misguided notion that treaty rights give land title to indigenous peoples, the treaty process allows Canada *some* rights to land, which is populated currently by descendants of the original inhabitants. Indigenous peoples have lived on the land long before the arrival of European and other settler populations and therefore are entitled, legally and morally, to determine the future of their people and their territory.

While treaty rights allow Canada to have some say in determining how the land is used, these rights do not trump the entitlement of the First Nations and Métis populations. The rights of indigenous peoples supersede the rights of either the provincial and national governments or the rights of corporations operating in Canada. However, the Canadian government has continued to undermine these rights, and denied indigenous peoples the proper human rights, dignity and respect they merit in determining their own future.

Both Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan band councils have called for a moratorium on tar sands development.¹³ The calls are becoming louder, with groups from a variety of backgrounds (including some industry) calling for planning and sanity to the disaster being created in Northern Alberta. Clearly, the management plan — or, more astutely, the *lack* of a management plan — proposed by Stephen Harper and the Alberta government cannot substitute for economic justice and

democratic governance. Canada is endangering the health and well-being of these communities, and the eyes of world are watching.