

In the shadow of the oil sands



Alberta's Industrial Heartland suffers from a "minimum of red tape"

Alberta's Industrial Heartland (AIH) is located northeast of Edmonton, AB. Over 300 square kilometres in size, it takes in four municipalities: Strathcona County, Sturgeon County, Lamont County, and the City of Fort Saskatchewan. Many chemical, petrochemical, petroleum, and associated industries are located in the AIH and there are currently 12 bitumen upgrader projects proposed or approved for this region.

The Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, which includes a plan for a "fivefold expansion" of the tar sands, is contributing to a rapid and uncontrolled expansion in the area. The Alberta Industrial Heartland's official website boasts, "Alberta leads the country in providing a 'business friendly' environment with a minimum of red tape and regulatory hurdles."

What are the problems?

1. Water use:

Many industrial facilities are being built on the edge of the North Saskatchewan River, which feeds many communities across the Prairies. Massive quantities of water are being drawn from the river by industry. Over the past few months, several industries have made applications seeking regulatory approval to each draw between 7 and 9 million cubic metres of water annually.

2. Carcinogens:

Much of the data on industrial emissions is based on an honour system, with industry reporting its own emissions, rather than independent monitoring by government officials. The risk of being diagnosed with cancer while living in the Industrial Heartland is significantly higher than in other places in Canada. Isn't it time that our politicians and public health officials target the industrial sector to eliminate carcinogens?

3. Meaningless guidelines:

At a recent court hearing, where residents argued that they deserved to be consulted about the construction of a new upgrader, evidence was presented that documented sulphur dioxide emissions near residents' homes were twice the provincial "guidelines." Officials argued that pollution "guidelines" are just that – guidelines, not laws.

4. Air quality:

Fort Air Partnership runs an air monitoring system for the region and is currently funded and influenced by industry. Dr. Blake, an independent researcher who is part of a Nobel prize-winning team, did air sampling in the AIH region (2004-2005) and completed a report on air quality. He found the air quality in the AIH region comparable to air in polluted cities such as New York and Shanghai.

5. Environmental impact:

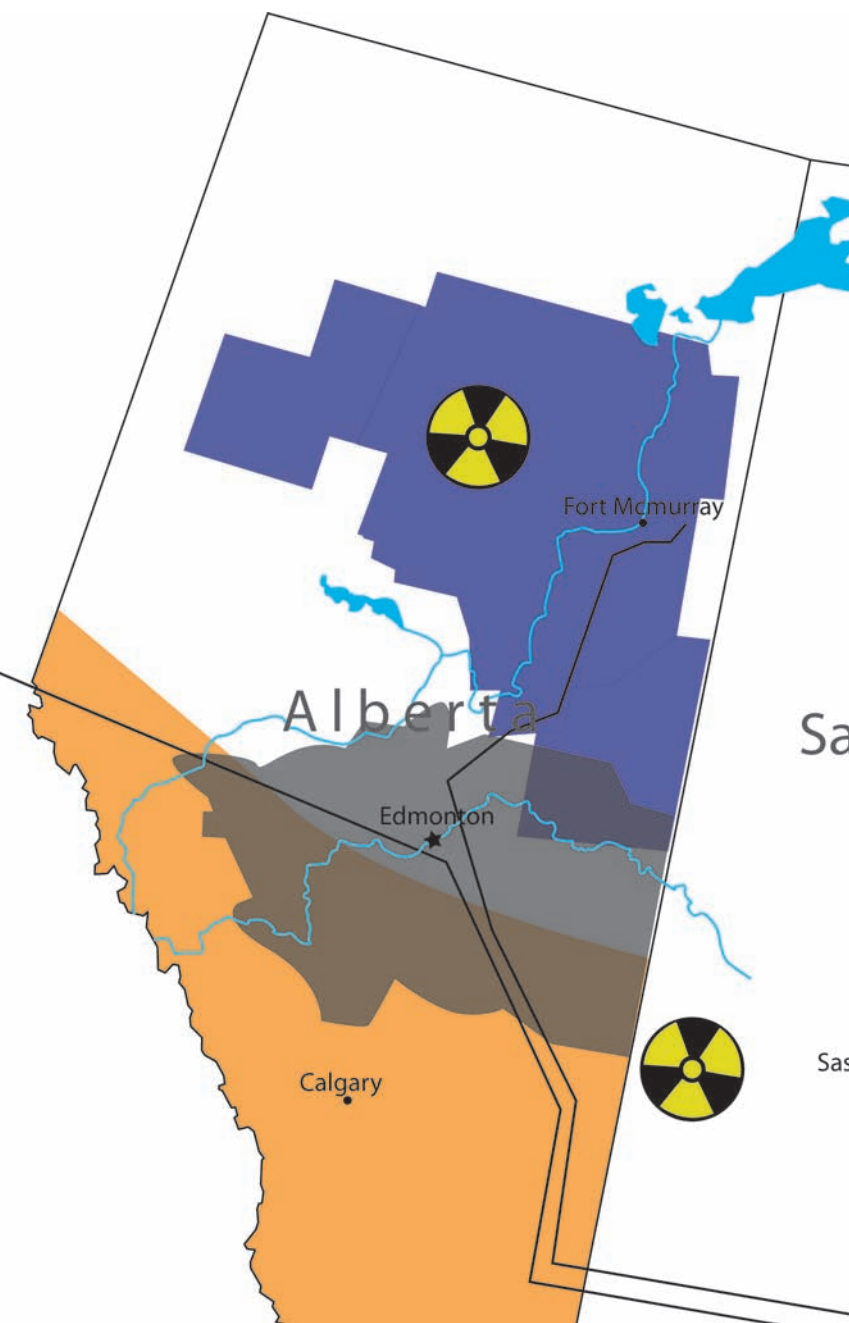
Industries proposing a new facility in the AIH hire consultants to prepare Environmental Impact Assessments to determine the impact of a proposed industrial facility. These are not independent assessments and they usually underestimate the health risks associated with oil sands expansion.

6. Emergencies:

If there is a chemical emergency or any other industrial disaster, the residents living in this region must rely on a telephone system to be notified of a "Shelter in Place" or evacuation. Shelter in Place means you go indoors immediately, lock doors and windows, enter and seal a smaller room, seal doors and windows with duct tape or wet cloths, and close all vents that draw in air from outside. The system is flawed with human and technical errors. During a recent H₂S leak, it took almost three hours for residents in the immediate area to be notified.

7. Directly affected:

A proposed industrial facility is not required to go to a hearing if there are no individuals deemed “directly affected.” Usually, only those residents living within a five kilometre distance of a proposed industrial site are considered “affected” and qualify for financial assistance for legal representation and witnesses. Yet, pollution knows no bounds. The narrow interpretation of “directly affected” is part of a government trend to streamline, fast track, and simplify regulatory processes. The result is that individuals and environmental groups are prevented from participating in public hearings.



Residents' demands:

The individuals who live and work in and around the Alberta Industrial Heartland are not against industrial development. They support responsible development that is ecologically and socially sustainable. They call for the following:

1. A complete, thorough, and accurate counting of all industrial emissions and an assessment of the combined impact by independent auditors.
2. A halt to the rezoning of land for industrial use until the promised provincial land use strategy is developed.
3. The development of a provincial water policy that protects and preserves Alberta's water.
4. The development of environmental laws with enforceable pollution regulations.
5. A full independent environmental impact assessment to assess the cumulative impact of current and proposed industrial activity prior to permitting any further industrial expansion.
6. Removal of the restrictions on who's “directly affected.” Give all Albertans the opportunity to participate in Alberta's regulatory approval processes and have a voice in protecting their resources, their environment and their future.

– Research provided by the Sturgeon/Strathcona chapter of the Council of Canadians.



For more information, please contact the Council of Canadians' Prairies Regional Office at 1-877-729-4500, or visit canadians.org.