

# POISONED WATERWAYS

## ALBERTA TAR SANDS DEVELOPMENT THREATENS LOCAL WATERSHEDS

By Meera Karunanathan

**A**s a child in Fort Chipewyan, Steve Courtoreille was able to dip his cup into the Athabasca River and drink straight from it. Today, as a First Nations councillor and a grandfather, he laments that anyone going out on the river on a trapping expedition now is forced to carry copious amounts of bottled water in order to stay hydrated, because water from the river is no longer safe to drink.

This past August, Fort Chipewyan hosted an international conference dealing with the impacts of tar sands development on water. The Water Keepers III conference brought 300 guests from all over North America, including representatives from environmental and social organizations, politicians and journalists.

Fort Chipewyan is considered ground zero for the devastation caused by Alberta's oil boom.

*The Globe and Mail* reported in May 2006 that the sequestered hamlet of 1200 residents has experienced rare forms of cancer in numbers comparable to those of large cities. Both the federal and provincial governments have dismissed the concerns.

A few years ago, the community's family doctor, Dr. John O'Connor, spoke out about the unusually high cancer rates. Dr. O'Connor was shocked when Health Canada denied the claims and responded with measures that threatened his medical licence.

### GROWING RESISTANCE TO TAR SANDS DEVELOPMENT

In 2003, the community decided it had seen enough. The leadership of

the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN), the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) and Métis local 135 called for a halt to new tar sands developments until the health impacts on their community could be determined.

The community is calling for a thorough investigation that will include, among other elements, a baseline health study, a land use plan and a cumulative effects assessment.

But their call has fallen on deaf ears. According to Miskew Cree Chief Roxanne Marcel, five new tar sands projects have been approved since then.

Discussions with the Alberta government have been facilitated through the multi-stakeholder body called the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), which has included representatives from industry. In 2006 the ACFN pulled its membership from CEMA, and the MCFN withdrew in 2007.

Now First Nations' leadership is calling for meaningful consultation through government-to-government discussions – without the presence of industry – at key stages of the approval process, and not after the fact.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers at the conference argued that in continuing to allow the destruction of the Athabasca watershed, the provincial and federal governments were in violation of Aboriginal treaty rights.

Water protection was central to the concerns of Fort Chipewyan members and to those of other Athabasca watershed communities gathered at the conference.

Laura Webb of the West Moberly First Nations emphasized that water was never ceded in treaty negotiations. "We never gave up the things we considered sacred," said Webb.



Sheila Maxwell

**An aerial view shows the proximity of Fort Chipewyan to the Athabasca River in Alberta.**

Strong concerns were also raised about the impacts of deteriorating water quality and quantity on the ability of First Nations communities to maintain their traditional way of life. Water contamination impacts on local wildlife have prevented communities from consuming their traditional diet, leaving them with less healthy alternatives such as packaged foods.

Vice-Chief Bill Erasmus of the North West Assembly of First Nations also raised concern about the threat of bulk water exports and stated that Northern communities would be most vulnerable if the federal government ever decided to sell water to the United States.

Above all else, delegates to the conference stressed the need for unity opposing the tar sands. This means that as Aboriginal communities move forward in their uphill struggle against the powerful oil industry, the Alberta government and the federal government, it will be crucial for environmental social justice and citizen advocacy organizations like the Council of Canadians to chip in and help.

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