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Long-term Damage to the Athabasca River is Anticipated from the Obed Coal Tailings Spill

On October 31, 2013, a containment pond was breached at the Obed Mountain coal mine, spewing 674 million litres of tailings into the Athabasca River, according to the mine owner Sherritt International (that volume has not been independently confirmed). The reported volume of the spill is unprecedented. For perspective, the spill represents the equivalent volume of the entire Athabasca River below Fort McMurray flowing for 44 minutes.*

On November 19, Alberta Environment released the results of water quality testing that took place up until November 5. To date, these are the only test results that have been released, even though sediment and other testing have also been conducted. "The results of the water tests are bad enough," says Harvey Scott of Keepers of the Athabasca, "but we are just as concerned about contamination of the river sediment and we need those test results as well. Releasing water results when the major impacts will instead result from sediment contamination has the effect of misdirecting the public's attention."

"Levels of some contaminants detected in the Athabasca River spill plume are cause for concern. These include: aluminum, barium, cadmium, chromium, lead, and mercury. But that is only a small part of the story. Since most of the contaminants that were released are contained in the solids of the slurry and not in the process water, release of water quality information without sediment and toxicology results serves to underestimate the impacts," says Dr. Kevin Timoney, an expert on the lower Athabasca River. "Depending on particle size, solids are settling to the bed of the Athabasca River at different distances downstream from the spill. Because the benthic life in the sediments form the basis for the aquatic food web in the river and its delta, this large spill has the potential to cause harm for years to come. The entire river downstream of the spill may be affected. With high river flows next spring and summer, deposited contaminants will be remobilized and move farther downstream where they will settle again and be remobilized in the future, which will result in pulses of contamination. A portion of the contaminated sediments will accumulate in the Athabasca River Delta and adjacent Lake Athabasca and its environs. Fishes and water birds may be harmed, as may humans who harvest them."

"Failing to inform the public of sediment impacts is part of an ongoing attempt to downplay the seriousness of the spill," says Jesse Cardinal of Keepers of the Athabasca. "Fish may become unsafe for human consumption, which means that the spill does pose a threat to human health, government assurances to the contrary."

"As physicians devoted to providing care to downstream residents for many years, we are appalled at the indifference this government exhibits towards the original inhabitants of this province, while going out of its way to support industry" notes two prominent physicians who provide medical care to communities on the lower Athabasca River, Dr. John O'Connor and Dr. Esther Tailfeathers.

Alberta Environment must stop keeping test results under wraps. The results of all water, sediment, and related testing to date, as well as information on impacts to fish and fish habitat, and remediation efforts and plans must be released immediately. Public pronouncements mean nothing without actions to back them up. Data and information requests to the Alberta government and to the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans have thus far been unsuccessful. It is time for government to live up to its pronouncements of openness and transparency. Free flow of information, not oil, is the currency of democracy.

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*Sherritt reported a total spill volume of 674,000 cubic meters, which is unconfirmed and may be an underestimate. The average November discharge of the Athabasca River below Fort McMurray for the period 2002-2011 is 254 cubic meters per second. To convert the volume of the spill to November flow rate of the Athabasca River below Fort McMurray: 674,000 cubic meters/ (254 cubic meters per second x 60 seconds per minute) = 44.2 minutes of volume of the entire Athabasca River below Fort McMurray.