

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

First Nations and NGOs Demand Full Disclosure and Government Action on Toxic Coal Mine Spill

December 18, 2013. First Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are concerned that the Alberta Government and Sherritt International continue to downplay the effects of the release of 670-million litres of coal mine wastes into the Athabasca River watershed and that the federal government has remained silent on the spill. Several groups have formed an ad-hoc committee to share information about the spill and advocate for appropriate responses from Sherritt, and the provincial and federal governments. The committee includes: Keepers of the Athabasca, Central Athabasca Stewardship Society, Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan Community-based Monitoring Program, MiningWatch Canada, and the Society of High Prairie Regional Environmental Action Committee. These groups are deeply troubled by the corporation's and the provincial and federal governments failure to acknowledge the significant environmental effects and ongoing risks to the Athabasca watershed.

To date there has been no formal notice or announcement from the federal government about the spill but the groups are demanding the federal government lay charges against Sherritt under Sections 35 and 36 of the Fisheries Act. Charges under the Alberta Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act are also warranted and should be pursued to their full measure, say the groups. The groups want to see full disclosure of the contents of the waste ponds and a commitment from the company and government for transparent long-term monitoring of the water and sediments in the creeks and Athabasca River from the origin of the spill to the Peace Athabasca Delta. Future monitoring must include participation of First Nations and include their technical and traditional knowledge.

As an example of how impacts are being minimised, the groups point to Sherritt's December 6th update, which does not acknowledge the substantive damage to fish habitat along the creeks that received the initial flood of wastes before they entered the Athabasca River. These creeks contained important fish habitat that would have been completely wiped out by the surge of water and solid wastes. The spill will also have direct impacts on early life stages of several sensitive species such as whitefish and bull trout. "Why don't we have an accounting of these impacts in the recent update from Sherritt?" asked fisheries biologist Carl Hunt.

Sherritt also continues to portray the spilled wastes as "natural" despite the presence of large amounts of toxic substances that would not naturally be released to the watershed at this scale. "Data from the National Pollutant Release Inventory gives us a sketch of what was in the Obed waste ponds and describing the material as 'natural' is akin to the well debunked claims that hydrocarbons in the lower Athabasca are from natural sources" commented Ramsey Hart of MiningWatch Canada.

Both Alberta and Sherritt continue to focus on the improvements in water quality since the spill and claim that there are no expectations of health impacts. The contaminants that entered the watershed have not, however, disappeared and there is no information being provided about the fate of the contaminants and how they are impacting the river bottom. Much of the life of a river comes from the bottom – exactly where these pollutants including highly toxic mercury, arsenic and cadmium, are going to end up. “We remain very concerned about the medium and longer-term impacts to the health of the river ecosystem and to those that depend on it for food” commented Jule Asterisk, Director of the Society of High Prairie Regional Environmental Action Committee

To date Sherritt has provided testing results as far downstream as Fort McMurray while the government sampled as far downstream as Fort Richardson Lake. At a public meeting on December 2, an Alberta Government employee stated that the plume was undetectable downstream of the Town of Athabasca. However, monitoring by Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations indicates that a plume with sediments three times the previous background concentration arrived at Lake Athabasca on December 4th and 5th. “Our findings conflict with those of the Government of Alberta and Sherritt that suggest the plume dissipated before reaching the Peace Athabasca Delta” commented Bruce Maclean who manages the First Nations’ community-based monitoring program. “We believe the spill will have long lasting impacts on fish and other wildlife, and consequently on human health. The MCFN and ACFN see the Obed accident as a direct negative impact on their ability to exercise their traditional rights and are considering legal action” added Maclean.

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Links:

Video of Dec 2 public forum including presentations from the Government of Alberta, First Nations and Independent Environmental Experts: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc2TvNa4x50&feature=youtu.be>

Presentation of NPRI data for Obed Mountain Mine by MiningWatch Canada:
<http://www.miningwatch.ca/news/spilled-coal-slurry-not-inert-laced-arsenic-toxic-metals-and-carcinogenic-pahs>