



**- Press Release**  
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**Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation challenge conclusions of the Obed Mine disaster's Human Health Risk Assessment**

## **Halloween 2013 nightmare continues**

Alberta's environmental risk is high: plenty of work for a competent, inspired government. On Halloween 2013, the Obed mine burst and released over 670 million litres of sludge and waste water into Apetowan creek and from there into the Athabasca River. In a letter to the Government of Alberta (Aboriginal Relations, ESRD, Alberta Health) and Canada (Environment, Health, Fisheries and Oceans), Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) and Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) describe how the Human Health Risk Assessment released by Obed Mine on January 22, 2015 ignores the precautionary principle, uses dubious methodology, and fails to protect downstream users of the Athabasca River. ACFM and MCFN question many aspects of the Assessment. Some of the issues raised are:

- The assumption that downstream communities are only exposed through drinking water, when in fact exposure can also be from eating wild foods, exposure to river mud, etc.
- Selecting only contaminants that exceeded guidelines ignores the precautionary principle. All of the contaminants present with the potential to cause harm should be examined.
- Water samples from the Athabasca river after the spill exceeded guidelines for turbidity, sulphide, aluminum, arsenic, barium, chromium, iron, lead, manganese, selenium, sodium, and uranium, yet only three of these were evaluated against health based limits
- While contaminants may not have remained suspended in the river, they did not simply disappear, and should be examined to determine their fate. No sediment samples from further downstream are given to compare how the contaminant loads disperse; a full risk assessment would look at the fate of the spilled materials from the source of the spill to deposition of where they ended up.
- Mercury (already of concern in the Athabasca River due to industrial activity) saw increases of up to 9 times background levels: mercury is known to biomagnify in the food chain particularly in walleye and northern pike, fish that are consumed by MCFN and ACFN members. Contaminants in these important fish were not included in the health assessment. Traditional Knowledge and understanding of local use of food and consumption patterns were also ignored.
- The health assessment contains inconsistencies, unproven claims, such as "generally PAHs do not accumulate in animals", and incompatible tables in Appendix B
- Exposure estimates were assumed to be "identical for recreational and First Nations receptors," without acknowledging the protection by Treaty in Section 35 of the Constitution of Canada,
- The report concludes that "any social effects would likely have occurred in the time immediately following the release while the plume was travelling down the Athabasca River." This statement ignores the contaminants settled into the river bottom and the release of these contaminants during spring thaws.

More downstream sediment sampling must be completed and MCFN and ACFN look forward to working together with industry and government to get the data needed to fill these identified gaps. Alberta currently has more than 1,500 dams, of which 65 are registered tailings dams that the Auditor General has determined are at risk due to incomplete inventory, inadequate inspection schedules, and no requirement for documentation. The dam that was breached at the Obed mine on Halloween 2013 was not even included in this dam inventory.

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