

Natives unite to fight oilsands

Vow to go to court to stop 'poisoning' of rivers

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FORT CHIPEWYAN - Aboriginal leaders vow to go to court to stop what they say is the destruction of their land and the poisoning of their water.

Chiefs from three provinces and the Northwest Territories made the joint declaration Sunday at the conclusion of a water conference in Fort Chipewyan.

They say Alberta's oldest European settlement is on the brink of catastrophe.

Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Allan Adam said aboriginal people cannot sit still and allow their land and water to be destroyed.

They want a moratorium on oilsands project approvals until government and industry can assess the damage caused by the developments and find ways to mitigate it, he said.

"Our message is plain and clear," he said Sunday to a standing ovation. "We have to slow down industry to let us catch up. ... If we continue to let industry and government behave the way they've been behaving the last 40 years there will be no turnback because it will be the total destruction of the land."

Residents believe leakage or spills from oilsands tailings ponds has polluted the Athabasca River and is poisoning their fish and their people.

Their former community physician reported a disproportionate number of rare cancers in the community of 1,200 on the northwest corner of Lake Athabasca, but the provincial government and Health Canada have resisted calls for baseline health tests.

Adam said that if the Chipewyan, Cree and Metis people of Fort Chipewyan don't act now, the government will have to move the entire community in 50 years because there won't be anything left to sustain them. "We'll be refugees in our own land," he said.

The chiefs approved a declaration to strengthen unity in their communities, work with other organizations and "initiate legal action to assert our rights."

"We believe that the pace of development within our territories is unsustainable and we are deeply concerned that governments are permitting development to proceed without our consent," the resolution reads.

Mikisew Cree Chief Roxanne Marcel said her people are banding together with the Chipewyan to hold industry and government to account.

"I think this will send a strong message to government," she said. "One First Nation is not a strong enough voice."

Adam said the local First Nations will try to negotiate a moratorium on oilsands development and if that doesn't work, it will launch court action alleging the government and industry has failed to consult with them as required by law.

"As First Nations people we're supposed to stay quiet and let everything be. No more!" he said. "What is happening here in this region is affecting everybody. We, as First Nations people, have the power to let the government and



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Chipewyan elder Pat Marcel, 70, on the shore of Lake Athabasca where several hundred aboriginal leaders and environmental groups met for a Water is Boss conference on the weekend. Marcel says the community is not scaremongering when they say toxins in the Athabasca are killing the people.

industry know -- no more!"

Aboriginal leaders are confident the courts will rule that the corporations have failed in their constitutional obligation to consult with them on the massive, multibillion-dollar projects and that they have not adequately assessed their cumulative impact.

"We've taken some bold steps and bold steps are what we need," said Mikisew Cree spokesman George Poitras.

The two native bands have dropped out of the Cumulative Environmental Management Association and other oilsands stakeholder committees, saying the body is too industry-driven and not addressing the concerns that have been raised.

Chiefs further north on the Slave River and Mackenzie River told the conference they are shocked to learn about the depth of pollution in the Athabasca region and ready to fight to prevent similar impacts on their waterways.

"This is frankly an eye-opener for our people, what the people are experiencing here," said Fort Good Hope Chief Frank Tseleie, who seconded the resolution.

There was much frustration at the conference, which drew 200 people from aboriginal groups, environmental groups and political parties.

One local First Nations member suggested that the presidents of Syncrude and Suncor, two of the major oilsands producers, be invited to eat a deformed fish with two jaws that was displayed at the conference.

A bulletin board in the community hall displayed the names of deceased members of the community going back to 1995, and community members who lost relatives to cancer as recently as this week blamed the deaths on the development.

One artwork in memory of Grant Courtoreille -- oil-soaked hands reaching out of Lake Athabasca -- was captioned "How many barrels of oil is my life worth to you?" Courtoreille died in January at age 28 four months after he was diagnosed with lymphoma.

His uncle, Steve Courtoreille, told the conference the pain of losing his nephew is still raw, but he has to talk about it to bring attention to the problem.

"I hope some of this footage ends up in the media," he said. "These are real lives we're talking about."

Lionel Lepine questioned how many more would die before the locals' concerns were taken seriously.

"If we don't act now, we will be a dead zone," he cried.

"We have a crisis up here. I don't want to bury any more people."

Lepine, who works for the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, said he's convinced if the river ran south into the heavily populated areas of the province instead of north, the oilsands operations would be under much higher scrutiny.

"That river would be pristine if it was flowing the other way," he said.

David Swann, Alberta Liberal environment and aboriginal critic who attended the conference, said even if the deaths aren't attributable to the environmental issues, it will be difficult to convince the people of that fact.

He said there's enough evidence of a serious problem that the government should stop approving new projects and investigate the concerns.

Melody Lepine, Mikisew Cree industrial relations co-ordinator, says residents here scoff at the claims by the energy companies that they will reclaim the land when the bitumen has been mined out.

"It's hard to take back time and undo the damage," she said.

"What is it going to look like 100 years from now?"

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