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First Nation Leaders in Ottawa Fight for Environment and Health

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By LEA STORRY, Slave River Journal Editor

“We live off the land – wild game and fish – once we put those all in jeopardy we’re pretty much left out in the cold.”

These words are from Fort Chipewyan Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation chief Allan Adam during a press conference in Ottawa on Friday, Feb. 15. His statement was in connection with a report released by a non-governmental organization (NGO) on the environmental and health effects of the oil sands, with an emphasis on how Ottawa is not fulfilling its environmental duties.

“The federal government has to safeguard the environment and health and the province of Alberta isn’t doing that,” asserted Adam.

The chief went on to say there are many concerns in the community to which the province is turning a blind eye. Mikisew Cree First Nation councillor Willis Flett concurred.

“We’re asking the government for support. Not to stop industry, but to ask them to slow down and let us catch up.”

The comments were made during the Toronto-based Environmental Defence launch of its report on the oil sands on Friday. Titled Canada’s Toxic Tar Sands, the detailed report accuses Ottawa of “letting the tar sands hold Canadians hostage on global warming,” said Matt Price, program manager with Environmental Defence. Fort Chip leaders were invited by Environmental Defence to bring their concerns to Ottawa. The tiny community is down stream from the oil sands industry and has been battling with the province to look into health and environmental concerns.

“When even former Alberta premier Peter Lougheed, who started the tar sands ball rolling, is calling for change, you know this is a major disaster,” said Aaron Freeman, policy director, Environmental Defence.

The report points fingers at Ottawa and failing to uphold its duty to clean up the booming Alberta industry.

Key findings include:

- Weak federal intensity targets will allow oil sands greenhouse gas emissions to double by 2020, wiping out progress that other parts of Canada are making to combat climate change.
- Toxic tailings ponds, visible from space, are seeping into the region's groundwater and pollution is rising in the Athabasca River contrary to the federal Fisheries Act.
- New federal pollution measures will let oil sands Volatile Organic Compound (VOC) emissions grow by 60 per cent by 2015.
- Oil sands pollution is causing acid rain in Saskatchewan and beyond.
- Oil sands upgraders and refineries are creating health sacrifice zones in Alberta and Ontario.
- Supertankers as big as the West Edmonton Mall are planned for the coast of BC to take oil sands oil to Asia.
- Federal environmental assessments rubber stamp massive new oil sands mines by relying on industry-driven management bodies that are known to be broken.

The NGO's report is calling for a number of initiatives from Ottawa such as ensuring Aboriginal control and benefit, clean up refineries and upgraders and use dry tailings for waste instead of wet tailings ponds that potentially leach pollution.