



Public hearings set to start into Peace River area emissions

BY SHEILA PRATT, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 19, 2014

EDMONTON - Some Peace River area doctors are afraid to speak out about health impacts of oil and gas activity and in some cases have declined to treat area residents who wondered if their health problems were related to emissions, says one of two independent health experts hired by the Alberta Energy Regulator.

Doctors fear negative consequences to their careers if they speak out, and in one case, one lab refused to process a test, says Dr. Margaret Sears, an Ontario expert in toxicology and health who will appear this week at a special hearing into complaints about emissions from the Baytex oilsands operation 32 kilometres south of Peace River.

In a rare move, the energy regulator called a special ten-day public hearing, starting in Peace River Tuesday, to examine whether emissions from wells or from bitumen heated in storage tanks could be causing health problems, including dizziness, headaches, cognitive impairment and sleeping problems among residents who left their homes.

To prepare for the hearing, AER hired eight independent expert to provide advice on various issues, including possible health impacts, the chemistry of local bitumen, impact on livestock, and to track various vapour sources on the plant sites.

Baytex also provided studies for the year. The company has consistently stated is complying with all regulation.

Both Ottawa-based Sears and Calgary-based toxicologist Donald Davies of Instrinsic Environment Services interviewed the residents as part of their study on health impacts.

Sears, with a PhD in chemical engineering and a specialty in health and environment, said in her interviews she found physician care was refused when a resident suggested a connection between their symptoms and oil and gas emissions.

Some doctors refused to treat emission-area residents: report

Posted by Joan Russow

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“Communications with public health officials and medical professionals revealed a universal recognition that petrochemical emissions affect health; however, this was countered by a marked reluctance to speak out,” wrote Sears.

The reluctance stems from fear of consequences, lack of data about exposure levels, and lack of knowledge on the part of doctors on how to deal with exposures to petrochemical emissions, she wrote.

“Physicians are quite frankly afraid to diagnose health conditions linked to the oil and gas industry,” wrote Sears, adding she heard several times about the case of Dr. John O’Connor who was threatened with losing his licence after raising an alarm about cancer rates in Fort Chipewyan.

Both experts concluded that vapours released into the air from heated bitumen could well be connected to health problems of families.

Davies concludes residents are not being poisoned, however.

The strong odours, not the toxic chemicals in the vapours, could be related to health problems such as dizziness, headaches, cognitive impairment, writes Davies, who has appeared for companies at dozens of hearings assessing pipelines and other projects.

“The weight of evidence indicates some prospect for people to notice odours from the emissions at times in the area and these odours might possibly result in certain individuals experiencing symptoms ...” writes Davis.