

Fort McKay First Nation launches own oilsands health study

BY MARTY KLINKENBERG, EDMONTON JOURNAL AUGUST 29, 2014



John O'Connor, the resident physician in Fort McKay, said a notice about the study has been posted in his waiting room.

Photograph by: Ryan Jackson, Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Frustrated by the lack of co-operation from government, the Fort McKay First Nation is about to start a study looking at the possible health effects of the oilsands. The First Nation, which is surrounded by energy development, has posted a notice at its headquarters and has begun to notify residents.

Dayle Hyde, communications director for the band, said Thursday that a health study is long overdue in the predominantly native community about 60 kilometres north of Fort McMurray. Officials recently stumbled across a school project local students had done about the effects of industry on the community in 1978.

"People have been concerned about the effects of industry on health here for many years, but all we have at this point is anecdotal evidence," Hyde said. "For facts to be accepted, you often need empirical evidence, and support from a scientific study."

Medical staff on the First Nation will begin collecting data in September and hope to have samples from all 700 residents within three months. Some people will be given brief physical examinations, while others will have blood drawn and samples taken of their hair, nails and urine.

The data will then be reviewed by a toxicologist and epidemiologist to see if there are links between residents' health issues and environmental conditions related to the oilsands.

"We want to do this properly," Hyde said. "We are not looking to do a biased study. In the least, this will give us baseline information to go on. Right now, we don't have any."

The Fort McKay First Nation previously negotiated the terms of a joint study with the provincial and federal governments that has since been abandoned. Meetings were held with government officials in 2012 and 2013, with another planned in April. That meeting was cancelled by Alberta health officials and has yet to be rescheduled.

"The bottom line is that at this point we feel like we have to take matters into our own hands," Hyde said. "We are not going to wait for the government to get on board. We have already been waiting (for government) for a long time."

The band is going to ask the provincial government, which previously set aside money for a study, to help fund the initiative. If not, an alternative means will be found to pay for it.

John O'Connor, the resident physician in Fort McKay, said a notice about the study has been posted in his waiting room, and he has been telling patients what to expect, as well.

"It is going to be a definitive, comprehensive look at everyone in this community, and it's going to be fully transparent every step of the way," O'Connor said. "It is a Fort McKay-owned study, and we are going to take the high road and be positive."

mklinkenberg@edmontonjournal.com

[Twitter: @martykej](https://twitter.com/martykej)

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal