



Residents, law group call for probe into health effects of sour gas

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3 comments



When Lois Hill began to ask neighbours about illnesses blamed on sour gas leaks in northeastern British Columbia, it didn't take her long to come up with a long list of complaints.

"I've got two pages of examples. Those are all incidents I can confirm through personal knowledge," said Ms. Hill, who lives in the Peace River region, where B.C.'s booming oil and gas industry is raising health concerns.

Respiratory problems, headaches and nausea are among the symptoms cited by her neighbours, and many mentioned health problems with livestock as well.

Now Ms. Hill, a representative of the Peace Environment and Safety Trustees Society (PESTS), has joined with the Environmental Law Centre at the University of Victoria in calling for an inquiry into the health impacts of the oil and gas industry.

"Does current government law and policy ... adequately protect the public from sour gas and other health hazards?" the Environmental Law Centre asks in a letter sent to Health Services Minister Colin Hansen on Monday.

The letter says exposure to sour gas can cause everything from temporary dizziness to "severe long-term symptoms including loss of memory, depression, and/or paralysis of facial muscles," as well as being linked to increased risk of cancer, diabetes and other disorders.

The request for an inquiry under the Public Health Act was supported by letters from several groups, including natives. And Charl Badenhorst, medical health officer for northeastern B.C., wrote PESTS to say their concerns were "valid," though he didn't take a position on whether an inquiry is needed.

The Environmental Law Centre letter states: "There can be no doubt that sour-gas leaks are a critical public health hazard – as demonstrated by a long list of accidents, including last year's sour-gas leak that killed a horse and injured a Pouce Coupe woman. Yet Oil and Gas Commission officials

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do not have adequate expertise or authority to protect the public from sour gas." The letter was signed by Calvin Sandborn, legal director of UVic's Environmental Law Centre, Tim Thielmann, a Victoria lawyer for PESTS, and Ms. Hill.

It says the government has "vague, unenforceable standards; lacks scientific or health-based setbacks ... [and] gives officials broad powers to exempt industry from setbacks, leak detection and emergency planning requirements."

The letter also says the B.C. Oil and Gas Commission, which oversees the industry, does not have the mandate or expertise to do that job, while health authorities are "assigned a peripheral role ... and are mainly involved after an incident has occurred."

Hardy Friedrich, a spokesman for the commission, said in an e-mail that his agency is aware of the issue and has been corresponding with PESTS.

"The B.C. Oil and Gas Commission has an extensive program in place to ensure public safety, including site inspections, proactively managing towards compliance and taking the necessary enforcement actions," he wrote. "In addition, inspectors also respond to complaints of odor or flaring as needed. In terms of specific health issues, those matters are addressed through Northern Health or the ministry, as appropriate."

The Ministry of Health Services said in a brief statement that the letter had just been received and is under review.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers wasn't able to provide an immediate comment.

Tribal Chief Liz Logan, of the Treaty 8 Tribal Association in Fort. St. John, said health concerns are widespread in native communities.

"We report smelling gas and they investigate and say, 'Oh, its such a low level, don't worry'... but we wonder about the cumulative impact over the long term. How's it going to impact our children?" she said.

3 comments

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