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Sour gas activists visit

Lori Clark
Tuesday March 04, 2008

The Pembina Agricultural Protection Association (PAPA) along with the Alberta Surface Rights Federation and close to 20 other organizations presented an informational session on the effects of low level exposure to hydrogen sulfide (H2S) on Wednesday, Feb. 27. More than 100 residents from Drayton Valley and Brazeau County packed the Frank Maddock high school theatre to listen to famed toxicology expert and author, Dr. Kaye Kilburn discuss his findings on research and treatment of those affected by the potentially lethal sour gas.

Joining Kilburn were speakers Oscar Steiner, an independent surface rights consultant, Andrew Nikiforuk, renowned journalist and author and Linda Thirsten, who, along with her family, suffered the effects of a dramatic sour gas leak at their Big Valley, Alta. ranch in October 2007. Kilburn has written numerous books including Chemical Brain Injury and Endangered Brains. He is regarded as one of the world's foremost authorities on H2S and the impact of chemical pollutants on the brain and lungs.

Kilburn's research shows that communities that live downwind of sour gas refineries tend to have reduced cognitive function. Kilburn says research proves that the brain is the major target of H2S.

The doctor contests industry claims that H2S is just 'an odour' problem as opposed to a potent neurotoxin. "The only science that has been done has either confirmed my findings or has been inconclusive by design and been funded by the American Petroleum Institute," says Kilburn.

According to Kilburn the absence of an H2S registry in Alberta, first recommended in 1985, along with the lack of proper long-term observational studies of exposed residents and workers is immoral. "If something is harmful to a fellow human and you knowingly expose them, it's against Christian standards and every universal standard of morality," he says.

He has studied the neurological effects of both low and high doses of exposure to hydrogen sulfide in many individuals, including more than a dozen patients from Western Canada's sour gas fields. Thirty-three per cent of Alberta's gas is sour or contains potentially lethal amounts of H2S.

Kilburn is the president and director of Neuro-Test Inc. in Los Angeles and is involved with key issues in environmental medicine and occupational health.

Nikiforuk told the audience that 80 per cent of the gas wells in Alberta leak. "The EUB used to monitor gas migration," he says. "They no longer do." He also stated that releases will happen. Nikiforuk believes the oil industry is more willing to listen to the public and act than the government or the EUB.

Nikiforuk also states that ground water in Alberta is very poor. "We now have people in central Alberta who can light their water on fire," he says. Nikiforuk explains the ability to ignite the water is the result of high methane levels not to mention the other chemicals present. Nikiforuk wants the public to know about the danger of methane as well. "Coalbed methane is coming your way," he stated.

In Nikiforuk's opinion, "The EUB has done a very poor job."

The journalist also explains the reason for the H2S tour taking place now. "Too many H2S releases are happening throughout the province," says Nikiforuk. He was pleased to share the fact that at present two landowner groups, one being the Rocky Rapids Concerned Citizens have taken EUB decisions to the Court of Appeals.

Nikiforuk also informed those in attendance that the EUB only has two air monitors for the entire province and gas plants only have a 52 per cent regulation compliance rate.

Oscar Steiner was on hand to inform the public about the EUB spying scandal and Bill 46. He is currently completing his thesis exploring 'Public Participation in the EUB/ERCB Process.' During his portion of the presentation, Steiner displayed invoices and e-mails detailing the EUB's covert investigation that occurred in the Rimbey area. The few invoices he has show the EUB spending a minimum of \$40,000 during the operation. "The EUB says they can't afford more air monitors; perhaps they should have used the money spent on private investigators on monitors instead." Steiner believes the EUB got away with what they did

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because the government allowed it to happen. He received a round of applause when he said, "Perhaps it's time for a new (EUB) board, perhaps it's time for a new government" Jolene Shannon, consultants manager for PAPA says, "The EUB was not frank or honest in their assessment of the January gas release." She is referring to a sour gas release in the Drayton Valley area in January 2007. Shannon believes that self reporting (volunteer disclosure from industry on sour gas releases) comes with meaningful consequences. She informed the audience of the current priorities for PAPA. "The three major points PAPA is working on include enforcement, flaring and standing issues."

The audience was moved by the detailed account Linda Thirsten shared on her family's ordeal with the oil company responsible for a sour gas leak near her home and the lack of co-operation from the EUB. On Oct. 26, 2007, the Thirsten family was exposed to sour gas. She says her first response was a mistake. "I called the company first," she says. "That was a mistake. The EUB has a dirty little deal with oil companies called self disclosure." Thirsten went on to explain that it took from 9:30 p.m. until 10:55 for an employee from the gas plant, 3/8 of a mile away to let her know that the flare had gone out, causing the release. "By that time, my kids were nauseous," she says.

Since the October incident, Thirsten says her horses have suffered and she fears the worst. "I haven't seen my horses run, buck or play since the release." Vet bills are mounting and the animals continue to lose weight. Thirsten has suffered ridicule from her neighbours for going public. Thirsten's youngest child has asthma and shortly after the release his lower lung function dropped to 42 per cent. In March of 2006, Thirsten says she was exposed by the same company's sour gas when she was riding on her property. The EUB didn't acknowledge that incident. To date the family has not received compensation for the 14 horses affected by the October release nor have they received any help from the EUB. The information was well received by local residents and one audience member pointed out that for people currently fighting against sour gas wells being approved near urban areas around Drayton Valley, it was support and knowledge they needed.

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