

Scientists discouraged from commenting on oilsands contaminant study

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Scientists discouraged from commenting on oilsands contaminant study



David Schindler Fish Only picture Photo: Ed Kaiser-Edmonton Journal comment



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OTTAWA – Environment Canada scientists have confirmed results published by researchers from the University of Alberta showing contaminants accumulating in the snow near oilsands operations, an internal federal [document](#) has revealed.

They also discovered contaminants in precipitation from testing in the region.

But the researchers were discouraged from speaking to reporters about their [findings](#), first presented at a November [2011 conference](#) in Boston of the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, says

the document, released to Postmedia News through access to information.

"EC's research conducted during winter 2010-11 confirms results already published by the University of Alberta that show contaminants in snow in the oilsands area," said a background document about Environment Canada's latest findings.

"If scientists are approached for interviews at the conference, the EC communications policy will be followed by referring the journalist to the media relations... phone number. An appropriate spokesperson will then be identified depending on journalist questions."

The original study, led by University of Alberta scientists Erin Kelly and David Schindler, analyzed winter snow and found that contamination levels were "highest near oilsands development compared to further away," said the document released by the government.

The document, which was attached to an email indicating the information was also in the hands of the office of Environment Minister Peter Kent, provided a scripted list of answers that explained researchers had tested the toxicity of the Athabasca River water in the spring of 2010 with negative results, and also that no link was established between levels of contaminants found and any effect on fish.

The scripted answers also recommended that the federal scientists decline answering questions about the cost of a monitoring system or about Environment Canada's role and actions in the region.

If asked questions of this nature, the scientists were told in the script to say: "I am a scientist. I'm not in a position to answer that question but I'd be happy to refer you to an appropriate spokesperson."

The document also said that Environment Canada scientist Derek Muir, who was slated to attend the conference in Boston, and another senior department official, Dan Wicklum, would be allowed to answer questions from reporters "if approved by media relations."

Asked to comment on the Environment Canada document, Schindler welcomed the preliminary results, noting that some critics were "still trying to cast our study as being biased."

But Schindler praised the federal scientists, Muir and Jane Kirk.

"It is a good study, and Jane is a very fine young scientist, who should be trusted to comment on her own results," said Schindler in an email. "Similarly, Derek Muir, her supervisor and a co-author, is one of the world's top contaminant experts, and Canadians should be ashamed that he cannot discuss results directly with the public, but must go through an official spokesperson."

An Environment Canada spokesman, Mark Johnson, said the scientists were not immediately available for interviews, noting that answers to questions about the research were included in the document.

He declined a request to release a copy of the presentation, delivered in Boston, explaining that it would be inappropriate to distribute it since it contained data being prepared for a peer-reviewed publication.

He also said that Environment Canada scientists, like other public servants, could not comment on policy matters.

Wicklum, who is also a scientist, took a leave of absence from his senior government position last January to accept a new job as chief executive of a new oil and gas company partnership set up to accelerate environmental performance of oilsands companies.

The Environment Canada document also said that substances found in the study were typical of development of all kinds and can even be found in the snow in cities with no heavy industry, but they were continuing their work.

“We are comparing the levels of contamination we found in our work to other studies and find that other studies report both higher and lower levels,” said the scripted answers. “These efforts will allow us to better understand deposition patterns and levels of oil sands related contaminants with a view to better identify their sources and ecological risks.”

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