

The Observer

Sarnia and Lambton County's daily newspaper since 1853

THURSDAY, AUGUST 18, 2005 75 CENTS (INCL. GST)

Edge

Your heart on your sleeve:
A band for all reasons

Inside



Canada

SIU investigating fatal
chase on Hwy. 402 after
robbery in London

A9



Natives need better protection

ENVIRONMENT COMMISSIONER SAYS SPECIAL POLICY WOULD BETTER SERVE PROVINCE'S FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

By JACK POIRIER
The Observer

There is a dire need for a better policy to protect First Nations people during environmental crises, says Ontario's Environment Commissioner.

Gord Miller said the current system is flawed and needs revamping, following a three-hour meeting where representatives of Aamjiwnaang First Nations and the local Occupa-

tional Health Clinics for Ontario Workers office outlined their concerns to the commissioner.

"Common sense tells me we would need to sit down with First Nations people to create a policy affecting First Nations," Miller said.

"It's sounds like the Ontario government may need a policy to deal with First Nations incidents."

The reserve is almost sur-

See related
coverage A3

rounded by petrochemical plants. Several members of Aamjiwnaang's environment committee told the commissioner they are concerned about the cumulative effects of industry and the fact that government jurisdiction often prevents action during a chemical release impacting residents.

Because the reserve falls under the federal government, but the surrounding lands and the environment are provincial responsibilities, there is often much confusion about which level of government should respond, said committee member Darren Henry.

That issue became a hot topic in May 2004 when a shipment of barrels containing hazardous waste crashed, sending the toxic substances spilling onto Aamjiwnaang lands.

"All the jurisdictions came, but then everybody was trying to sort it out," Henry said, adding every time there is a spill affecting Aamjiwnaang the jurisdiction card is played.

"Once the barrels came to us it was all of a sudden our problem," he said.

Miller said jurisdiction is a problem not unique to the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. But, just because the land is a federal responsibility, the environment - a provincial responsibility - doesn't stop at the reserve.

He said he would facilitate a

meeting between the band's environment committee and representatives from Environment Canada, Health Canada and Ontario's Ministry of the Environment, to help find a solution.

Miller also said he's well aware of the "disturbing" health issues affecting the Aamjiwnaang community, stemming from an environmental study released last year that found high levels of toxic substances contaminating Talford Creek.

The waterway is polluted with heavy metals far in excess of the "lowest effect" level - the point at which living organisms are harmed. Mercury levels were 10 times above what's considered safe.

A subsequent study has found

that girl births now outnumber boy births two to one, a trend that began in the early '90s. There are also concerns about miscarriages, developmental delays, birth anomalies and defects and still births.

Dr. Jim Brophy, executive director of the OHCOW clinic, said there needs to be more research done to prove a link to the presence of these "gender-bender" chemical pollutants that mimic sex hormones.

"We don't know enough yet," he said. "Major resources should be put aside to help determine the levels of these contaminants and their effects."

To contact the writer: jpoirier@theobserver.ca