

Pollution threatens reserve

First Nation band cites statistics showing illnesses

By NICOLE GERRING
Times Herald

AAMJIWNAANG FIRST NATION RESERVE, Ontario - The people who live on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation Reserve near Sarnia don't swim in Talfourd Creek anymore.

Children used to cool off in the creek, but about four years ago, they started getting sores on their legs.

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The creek now is filled with thick, brown water. Signs with skulls and crossbones warn people against swimming or fishing there, where residents of the reserve said they have spotted trucks unloading unknown kinds of waste into the water.

The creek, which flows into the St. Clair River across from Marysville, is not the only link between Chemical Valley industry and the Blue Water Area.

Sarnia's industrial area is about a five-mile drive from Port Huron across the Blue Water Bridge, and it's 800 yards away from Port Huron across the St. Clair River.

Although the wind usually blows west from Port Huron into Sarnia, it shifts depending on weather patterns, said Cory Behnke, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Oakland County's White Lake Township.

With a wind that shifts and blows into Port Huron from Sarnia come toxins, environmentalists say.

Chemical Valley pollution affects people on both sides of the St. Clair River, said Ron Plain, a member of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. Americans should wake up and take notice of the documented health problems at the reserve, Plain said, because they, too, could face the same problems.

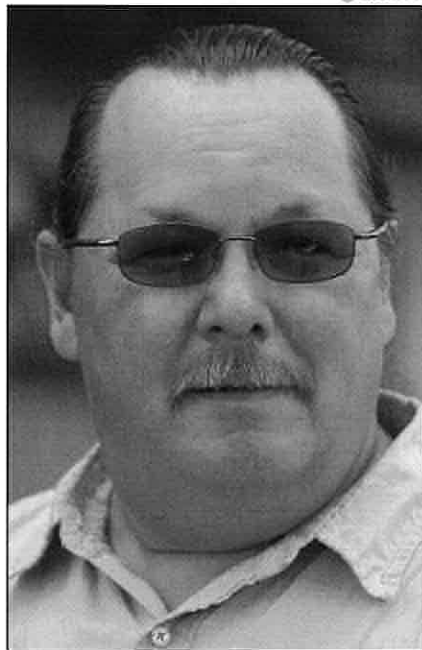
"The United Nations told me this is not a transboundary issue," said Plain, who, after years of advocacy, started working for the environmental justice group Environmental Defence and travels to share stories from the

reserve. "The UN is saying to me, (the pollution) goes up into the air, and it stops at the Canadian border."

Plain leads guests on what have come to be known as "toxic tours" of the reserve, which is surrounded by what amounts to 40% of Canada's petrochemical industry and other chemical and polymer plants.

His guests have included journalists from *The London Free Press* in London, Ontario, French science magazines, international filmmakers and *National Geographic*, whose staff called the region "the most polluted spot in North America."

Zoom Photo



Ron Plain

HEALTH PROBLEMS

SELF-REPORTED DATA

- 40% of people required an inhaler.
- 17% of adults had asthma
- 22% of children had asthma, versus the 8.2% of Lambton County's children with the condition.
- 26% of adults experienced high blood pressure.
- 26% of adults and 9% of children younger than 16 experience severe and chronic headaches.
- 23% of children 5 to 16 cite behavioral and learning problems.
- 13% of children 5 to 15 struggle with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- 16% of adults and 27% of children experience skin rashes, including eczema and psoriasis.
- 39% of women surveyed have experienced a miscarriage or stillbirth.

The history

The people of the Aamjiwnaang reserve have been living in the shadow of Chemical Valley since the 1960s, when shady land deals occurred between Canada's federal government and buyers who sold the land to industry, Plain said.

For several decades, the noise, air and water pollution of the plants seemed a minor inconvenience. But about four years ago, the people of the reserve realized their health problems - ranging from high rates of cancer to miscarriages and skewed birth ratios - were not normal.

After years of noticing health effects that weren't isolated to a select few, the people of the reserve, population 850, are becoming more vocal about what they believe is a connection between Chemical Valley's industry and their health.

On Oct. 4, Ecojustice of Canada published an investigative report detailing the massive toxic emissions in the Sarnia area. The study found there are 62 large industrial facilities within 25 kilometers - about 16 miles - of the Sarnia and the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. Of those, 16 are on the American side of the border.

Chemical Valley and its surroundings rank as the most polluted spot in Ontario, according to the study.

According to Canada's National Pollutant Release Inventory and the U.S. Toxic Release Inventory, the facilities produce 134,000 tons of substances in three categories: Air contaminants, toxic pollutants and greenhouse gases.

The Ecojustice study gained attention from media outlets in the United States and Canada, but it's not the first investigation to shout an alarm.

In August 2005, the study "Declining Sex Ratio in a First Nation Community," was published in the environmental health journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

The study, which was conducted by Aamjiwnaang reserve members, scientists from the University of Ottawa and employees of the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers, showed that from the early '90s to 2003, fewer and fewer male babies were being born on the reserve.

The steady decline in male births occurred between 1999 and 2003. The average birth ratio in recent years is 2 to 1, girls to boys.

That's highly unusual in any community, scientists say. The typical percentage of boy births versus girl births worldwide is 51% to 49%, according to The CIA World Factbook.

Cause and effect

The release of the birth data caused reserve members to call for a community health study, said Vicki Ware, health and environment representative for the Aamjiwnaang Band Council.

Jim Brophy, executive director of the health clinic for Ontario workers in Sarnia, said although researchers haven't determined a direct connection between health problems and the substances emitted from Chemical Valley plants, such as toluene, benzene, mercury and dioxins, that doesn't mean a study couldn't demonstrate a link.

"We haven't been able to establish a cause-and-effect relationship. Even the birth ratio doesn't tell us that," Brophy said. "But I think (with) the cumulative evidence ... there's a lot of concern about the potential health effects."

Ware said the Aamjiwnaang health office is determining the feasibility of doing a widespread community health study. They're trying to learn if community members would undergo tests on their urine, blood and hair.

Ada Lockridge, an Aamjiwnaang resident who co-authored the study on birth ratios, said community members want the government to create tougher laws that would regulate the amount of emissions allowed in a community, rather than just ensuring individual companies do not exceed pollution levels.

"Industry says they follow government guidelines," Lockridge said. "Our government has to tighten up and make them do something about it."

Aamjiwnaang Chief Chris Plain said they'll lobby the federal and provincial government to enforce existing laws and change the environmental

- 5% of people experience thyroid problems.

- 9 to 11% of people experience kidney problems.

RESPONSE FROM 79 VISITORS

- 44% complained about the unpleasant smell.

- 32% reported trouble breathing, coughing and asthma worsening.

- 14% said they developed a headache during their visit.

[Zoom Photo](#)



By MELISSA WAWZYNSKO, Times Herald

WARNING SIGN: Ron Plain, Environmental Defence Canada Aboriginal program manager, speaks about mercury levels in a pond where he sometimes fishes.

[Zoom Photo](#)



Times Herald photos by MELISSA WAWZYNSKO

TOXIC TOUR: Ron Plain, aboriginal program manager for Environmental Defence Canada, walks through the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve burial grounds, August 24, where he said members of his family are buried alongside 400-year-old Aboriginal graves. Plain is the leader for tours of the reserve's polluted heritage.

[Zoom Photo](#)



PROXIMITY: NOVA Chemicals rises above the former Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve day-care center and a community baseball diamond. Environmental Defence Canada has described a benzene release from the NOVA Chemical plant the company failed to report.

[Zoom Photo](#)

regulations.

"We want the cumulative effects taken into account when exceedance levels are issued," he said.

The Sarnia Lambton Environmental Association represents 20 companies in the area and does air and water testing.

Dean Edwardson, general manager of the association, said area industry would help pay for a study of area health issues.

"We want an open and transparent process," he said. "We want something that is scientifically valid, peer reviewed and is meaningful."

He said data released in September from the County of Lambton Community Health Services Department shows that the birth ratios of the Sarnia-Lambton area are similar to those for the rest of Ontario.

Although the association tests the air quality with eight air analyzers and a river water analyzer, the testing is not comprehensive enough, Plain, the activist from Aamjiwnaang, said.

The U.S. group Global Community Monitor, which works all over the world on environmental justice campaigns, visited the reserve this spring to begin an air-monitoring project. The people of the reserve were taught how to use simple instruments to measure air quality and what chemicals are in the air.

Denny Larson, executive director of the group, led workshops at Aamjiwnaang in May. He has traveled the globe teaching local residents how to fight pollution in their backyards, and said he was astounded by his visit to Sarnia and Chemical Valley.

"We do this work in 19 countries and work in some very polluted places in the United States," he said. "I have to say when I got the toxic tour in Sarnia, we were pretty shocked. Rarely have we seen such a high concentration of the variety of chemical facilities and petrochemical refineries in a small area. With the special ecosystem of the lake and the river and the farming going on all around it. ... It's an incredible juxtaposition that slaps you in the face."

Larson said Canadian environmental laws are not nearly as strict as U.S. environmental laws and that could have influenced much of Chemical Valley's industry to move to Sarnia instead of Port Huron.

Local residents, such as Tina Galassi who lives on Military Street in Port Huron, said they're concerned about the potential health effects from nearby industry.

"I'm really worried about it," she said. "Sometimes when the wind switches (from) the east, we have to actually shut our windows the smells are so bad."

Galassi said she had three miscarriages after having four healthy children, which she thought was abnormal.

"They say don't eat the fish, but hello - don't breath the air," she said.

Jim Hall of Corunna, who works in Sarnia, said politicians are reluctant to create tougher environmental laws for industries that pay good wages to many community members.

"I think everybody's got (worries about pollution) in the back of their mind," he said. "Because (the plants) employ people at above-average wages, there's a direct economic benefit to high-paying jobs. There's not enough political will to change it."

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TOXIC WARNING: A sign at Tallfour Creek warns that it contains toxic substances known to cause serious health risks. The Aamjiwnaang First Nation Reserve has been referred to by the National Geographic Society as the "most toxic site in North America."

[Zoom Photo](#)



'TOXIC TOUR' GUIDE: Ron Plain drives by the long-closed Welland Chemical during a tour of toxic sites on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve.

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