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Progress made on environmental concerns

By JACK POIRIER
The Observer

Jurisdictional issues will no longer impede the investigation of chemical spills on Aamjiwnaang First Nation land, officials proclaimed at an environmental summit Tuesday.

Members of Aamjiwnaang's environment committee joined Ontario's Environment Commissioner Gord Miller in declaring the four-hour meeting at the band's community centre a success.

Miller said Ontario's Ministry of the Environment (MOE) has agreed to pursue investigations on First Nation land in the future, as long as the spills originate on provincial land.

In the past, pollution issues were difficult to address because the environment is a provincial responsibility and the authority for native lands is federal.

"There was a lot of talk about working together and co-opera-

tion," Miller said.

Further meetings will be needed, he said, with the hope of setting up an environmental committee with representatives from local industry, the native band, and other political officials and community leaders.

Ron Plain, chairperson of the band's environmental committee, said the issue of what to do with the contamination of Talfound Creek was also discussed at the closed-door session.

An environmental study found 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.

Subsequent studies, as reported in The Observer, have suggested a link between so-called "gender-bending" chemicals and anomalies in the local birth rates. A community health survey of more than 400

Aamjiwnaang residents found the birth ratio of boys to girls plummeted about 60 per cent between 1998 and 2003.

"This is going to start a process that will benefit generations of people," Plain said.

The survey also found high numbers of miscarriages, infertility, still births, birth defects, endometriosis, learning disabilities in children and other health problems affecting Aamjiwnaang residents.

Close to 40 per cent of the women who responded reported at least one miscarriage or stillbirth.

"One woman I talked to had nine miscarriages," said fellow Aamjiwnaang committee member Ada Lockridge, who conducted several of the personal consultations with residents.

She found a disturbing trend, with several residents experiencing the same health problems, symptoms and illnesses. She tallied the results,



NORA PENHALE/The Observer

Aamjiwnaang First Nations held a summit meeting with various government agencies, Tuesday. Ontario Environment Commissioner Gord Miller, left, speaks with Aamjiwnaang environmental committee members Ada Lockridge and Ron Plain.

on a body map for yesterday's audience, which included doctors, scientists and government bureaucrats.

"Some of the horror stories from people, all you could do was listen, then walk out and start crying," she said.