



Environment and Air Pollution

As Aboriginal people, we have a responsibility to honour and protect Mother Earth, as our ancestors before us have done. As the caretakers of Mother Earth, we must use our voices and knowledge to speak up for Mother Earth, the source of all life.

Environmental degradation impacts the health and well-being of not only First Nations people but also all peoples of North America and the world in a number of ways. Pollutants and contaminants, particularly those that originate from industrial development, are detrimental to the health of all living things, including humans. Different chemicals in the air affect the human body in negative ways.

How Does Air Pollution Impact the Environment?

There are four primary categories of air pollutants:

- Criteria air contaminants (sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides etc., cause acid rain/smog)
- Persistent organic pollutants (PCB's, pesticides, accumulate in human and animal tissue, long-term exposure has been linked to cancer, reproductive disorders etc) (Ritter et al).
- Heavy metals (mercury, cadmium, lead etc. adverse health effects as the result of exposure include: kidney and bone damage and cancer. (World Health Organization, 2007).
- Toxic pollutants (asbestos, benzene, methylene chloride, increased risk of cancer, significant health problems) (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency).

How Are Aboriginal People Impacted by Air Pollution?

- As Aboriginal people, we are the caretakers of Mother Earth, as we are connected to the Earth and all living things, we must care for the earth as we care for ourselves.
- PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls) are suspected to be "responsible for increased cancer incidence rates and other health issues" (Reading, J., 2009). Findings from a study indicated that "Inuit women living in Northern Quebec had seven times the PCB concentration in their milk than that of other Canadian women" (Dewailly, et al., cited in Krevans Brieger, K., 2011).
- Pollution and smog are concerns for First Nations given the proximity of many industrial plants to their communities.
- Findings from one study reported that incidences of middle-ear infections increased with prenatal exposure to insecticides (hexachlorobenzene, and dieldrin) among Inuit children (Dewailly et al. 2000).
- A number of studies have suggested that major health problems such as cancer, diabetes and low infant birth-weight that significantly impact the Aboriginal population may be related to the amount of chemical contaminants in the environment (Pesatori, 2003; Ritchie, 2003; Baibergenova, 2003; Berti, 1998 cited in Chan, L. 2005.)

What Are Some Factors that Threaten Air Quality?

- Landfills containing transformers capacitors, and “other PCB waste can release PCBs into the air. This environmental contamination may continue to occur due to the disposal of old electrical equipment containing PCBs” (Green Facts).
- The incineration of municipal waste (may lead to PCB pollution and the production of dangerous by-products, such as hydrogen chloride (HCl) and dioxins) (Green Facts). PCBs may also evaporate from contaminated water bodies, such as the Great Lakes.
- Human activities such as transportation (e.g., cars, trucks), the burning of fuels for electricity and heat production, industrial processes and the use of certain products (i.e.; paints, solvents).

What Are the Relevant Pieces of Legislation that Address Air Pollution?

The **Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA)** is the principal Act for the regulation of environmental contaminants. The CEPA grants the federal government authority “to regulate and control substances through national quality objectives, guidelines and/or standards” (Health Canada).

Ontario's **Environmental Protection Act (EPA)** is the primary pollution control legislation in Ontario. The EPA legislation prohibits “discharge of any contaminants in to the environment that cause or are likely to cause adverse effects” (Drinking Water Source Protection).

What Can I Do on a Local Level to Prevent Air Pollution?

- Ensure that federal and provincial governments continue to respect the inherent Treaty Rights of First Nation communities to be consulted and accommodated when environmental projects and/or strategies are proposed; address the infringement of Aboriginal and Treaty Rights by federal and provincial legislation;
- Be aware of what is going on in your community. Check your local newspaper or the environmental registry for updated information regarding the Canadian Environmental Protection Act
- Educate our children and youth about our Traditional roles and responsibilities.
- Continue to advocate for the strengthening of the Canada Environmental Protection Act and other legislation to your local MP and MPP
- Advocate or lobby for additional funding to conduct research regarding the impact of air pollution on the health of women (endocrine disruption, reproductive health, low birth-weight, development of children).

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