

13. Ecological Justice

Several presenters touched on other important environmental issues that are interconnected to climate change, and offered insight into the change of attitude toward the Earth that will be needed in order to properly confront climate change and achieve environmental sustainability.

Janelle Pewapsconias focused her presentation on indigenous water rights. Her home is Little Pine First Nation (Minahikosis), a 5 mile by 5 mile reserve through which the Battle River flows.

Little Pine First Nation is very concerned with the poor quality of water in the Battle River, and the river's poor riparian health. The Battle River suffers from low oxygen levels, low fish populations, eroding and slumping banks and high nutrient levels. Seventy miles upstream from Little Pine First Nation, in Alberta, the Battle River is used for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes. It receives runoff laden with pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and other pollutants which impact upon wildlife, habitat and water quality.

Janelle Pewapsconias explained that Wāhkōhtōhwin is the innate relationship that connects humans to the Earth. To protect the water - based on Indigenous Water Rights - for present and future use, it is imperative to understand that Little Pine's relationship to water is firstly derived from wāhkōhtōhwin, Nehiyaw (Cree) worldview and tradition. Little Pine First Nation's belief system stems from the worldview that all living things are interconnected and human spirits are the most pitiful and dependent beings on Mother Earth. In her testimony before the Hearings Janelle said: "We believe that Creator made humans to be fashioned like Mother Earth; like the blood in our bodies, our water sustains life on the planet. Water has a spirit, water is alive, and water is the epitome of interconnectedness. Natural laws are the rules or life guidelines that we believe to be in existence since time immemorial for human beings to follow. It is these practices that led us to thrive sustainably, by not taking more than necessary, giving gratitude, and taking responsibility for life's continuation on our Mother Earth."

Building on her comments on constitutional rights and sovereignty (see earlier section) Janelle's focus is to use inherent rights and treaty rights to protect the spirit of the water in the Battle River, and to advance Little Pine First Nation's "right to sovereignty". To live water sovereignty, Janelle said, Little Pine must "walk with two eyes open, meaning we must utilize the best of western science and knowledge, but walk with the worldviews, wisdom and values of our ancestors first."

She stated that inherently there are two main types of rights in regard to water that will need to be exercised: the right to manage the waters and lands (even beyond the borders of Little Pine First Nation), and the right to engage in Environmental Protection, which can include policing, policies, implementation of economic tools, and planning. To become a self-determining nation in terms of water, Little Pine will need to indicate sovereignty through letter or declaration.

The western world view has led to "market failure of water quality in Little Pine First Nation", Janelle Pewapsconias stated. "Policy could regulate agriculture, industry and domestic watercourse use, which would influence (reduce) the amount of pollutants entering the river and amount of water usage, and alter the outcomes downstream."

Although Little Pine now has a reverse osmosis system, which has at least improved drinking water quality, it is a short term solution. Long term sustainability calls for "eliminating the water market, allocating water resources sustainably, giving gratitude to the life that sustains the people, and creating policy and practices that achieve self-determination of our Nation", Janelle concluded.

Brian Grandbois reflected on the history of the Primrose Air Weapons Range located in northeast Alberta and northwest Saskatchewan, and reminded the hearings of how the Weapons Range was imposed upon First Nations and Métis people living in the area in the 1950's. The Dene community that Brian is part of was told by the federal government that it must move to make way for the Weapons Range. At first, the community was promised the move would be temporary; the Primrose Air Weapons Range was to be leased for 20 years. That was sixty years ago.

Dene residents moved to 3 different reserves in the Cold Lake area. Later, Dene children were taken away to residential schools, Brian said. As time went on, a self-reliant people began to suffer many social ills. Brian recalled when members of NATO started bombing. In the 1980's the Cruise missile was perfected using the Primrose Air Weapons Range. More recently, Brian noted, cluster bombs used in the Middle East were tested "on the grave sites of my people".

Max Morin presented to the Citizen Hearings on behalf of the Committee for Future Generations. He spoke to the critical importance of water to life on Earth, and the multiple threats posed to water quality in Northern Saskatchewan by uranium mining, Alberta oil sands pollution, and a possible high-level nuclear waste disposal project in northern Saskatchewan.

He told the Commissioners that the Committee for Future Generations has given special priority to the issue of high level nuclear waste disposal. Max recalled the Walk from Pinehouse to Regina in 2011, which the Committee for Future Generations organized in order to mobilize opposition to a proposal for high level radioactive waste disposal in the Pinehouse region. The Walk proved to be a successful way to increase public awareness of the long term threat posed by nuclear waste. Max Morin is deeply concerned that if a high level nuclear waste disposal project in Saskatchewan's north was allowed to proceed, the buried radioactive waste could ultimately contaminate ground water.

Max Morin also expressed concern about the risks to ground water associated with uranium mine and mill tailings in Northern Saskatchewan. Several northern uranium mine sites each have millions of tonnes of radioactive tailings stored on-site, and over time these long-lived wastes could leak out of the tailings management facilities in which they have been deposited, and contaminate surface or ground water.

Finally, Max Morin drew attention to the negative environmental impacts of the oils sands industry based in northeast Alberta. He reported that elders in northwest Saskatchewan are beginning to see early signs of acid rain pollution released by oil sands operations. He also drew the attention of the Hearings to the toxic tailings pond legacy the oil sands industry has left behind.

David Henry, a board member with the Saskatchewan Environmental Society, also spoke to how very polluting the oil sands industry is. For example, just one plant, Suncor Energy, in one year puts out roughly 30,000 tonnes of VOC (volatile organic compounds), 22,000 tonnes of SO₂ (sulphur dioxide), 14,000 tonnes of particulate matter and 70,000 tonnes of GHGs (greenhouse gases).

David focused his testimony on the risks to Saskatchewan from the sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen emissions from the oil sands industry. Within two weeks of being released into the atmosphere, these emissions turn into sulphuric or nitric acid, and have fallen to Earth as acid rain or acid snow. David noted that "together all of the Oil Sands operations in Alberta spew an estimated 160,000 tonnes of acid-producing pollution into the air each year". Because the predominant winds are from the west, much of this acid rain blows into Northern Saskatchewan.

It is well documented that long exposure to acid rain has many detrimental effects. Significant amounts of acid buildup can damage or destroy fish populations and their food chains, acidify soils, gradually kill forests, damage homes and infrastructure, and cause respiratory problems in humans.

David Henry emphasized that much of northern Saskatchewan and northern Canada shares a common geology: the Canadian Precambrian Shield. Scientists judge it to be the world's most sensitive landscape to the effects of acid rain. Its thin soils, granite bedrock, and lack of limestone in the soils mean that the Shield is quickly impacted by acid deposition.

The first signs of acid rain are beginning to appear around La Loche, 200 km downwind from the oil sands mines. David explained that a neutral solution has a pH of 7.0. Environment Canada classifies any precipitation under 5.0 as acid rain. Limited data show that rain and snow around La Loche has had a pH below 5.0 in several monthly readings. To prevent serious problems from occurring, David Henry stressed that all levels of government must adopt stricter emission standards for all oil sands mining and refining operations. Most importantly, our society needs to focus on reducing fossil fuel consumption.