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A toxic creek runs through it

FIRST NATION MEMBERS WORRY ABOUT HEALTH IMPACTS OF POLLUTION

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series about environmental problems at the Aamjiwnaag First Nation.

By **GEORGE MATHEWSON**
The Observer

SPECIAL REPORT

AAMJIWNAANG FIRST NATION — There is nothing about Talfourd Creek where it trickles through this reserve that reveals its dark secret: no belly-up fish, no two-headed frogs.

But appearances can be deceiving, says Wilson Plain.

Plain is standing on a footbridge in Bear Park and describing an environmental study released this summer that confirmed what was long suspected: Talfourd Creek is contaminated with toxic substances.

In places, PCBs, nickel, cadmium, arsenic, lead and other metals exceed the Ontario "lowest effect" level, the point at which water creatures are affected.

But there's more, says Plain, a member of the band's newly-formed environmental committee.

Additional sediment samples were collected at three spots this summer and tested by a London-based consulting firm. And the results are back.

Here, where the creek winds through the reserve's ceremonial grounds before reaching the St. Clair River, the level of lead contamination is 282 parts per million.

That's nine times the safe threshold for aquatic life and dangerous enough to require remedial action, according to Environment Ministry guidelines.

"It's not safe for kids to play here," said Plain, pointing out new warning signs. "And we don't know what this is doing to pregnant women."

Located in the midst of the sprawling industrial complex

known as Canada's Chemical Valley, Aamjiwnaag is one of the most economically successful aboriginal reserves in Canada.

Direct jobs, a flourishing industrial park and pipeline easements have enriched the band and its 900 on-reserve members. Last year, federal support accounted for less than half the money spent on programs and services, according to an annual audit.

But residents are beginning to ask if living so close to so many chemical plants comes at a cost.

Many women are reporting multiple miscarriages and developmental delays in school children, said Vicki Ware, Aamjiwnaag's human resources worker.

"It seems like there's been an astronomical number of miscarriages, and it's scary," she said. "We want to get to the bottom of it."

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Wilson Plain stands near a footbridge that crosses Talfourd Creek on the Aamjiwnaag First Nation. Recent sediments tests found lead levels at this spot are nine times the level considered safe for aquatic life.

