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Toxic cocktail' being tracked with buckets

GROUP HELPS FIRST NATION MONITOR SPILLS, ACCIDENTS

By LINDSEY COAD
The Observer

Federal and provincial governments aren't protecting the air of Aamjiwnaang First Nation residents, an environmental watchdog says.

"There's some really nasty stuff coming out of those stacks. This is what we call a toxic cocktail area. We could even smell vinyl chloride when

we were driving by," said Ruth Breech, program director of Global Community Monitor (GCM).

This weekend, the non-profit organization showed 13 Aamjiwnaang residents how to track pollution in the case of an accident, spill or leak from the petrochemical plants that virtually surround the reserve.

"This is a serious public health crisis here. There's no doubt in my mind, given the proximity of the plants to the reserve," Breech said.

Should a crisis occur, the community hopes its findings will push the government to police industry and impose stricter emission limits.

It's a request the community has made since a health survey revealed female births outnumbered males by a two-to-one ratio between 1998 and 2003.

The survey also found higher than normal rates of miscarriages, infertility, still births, birth defects and childhood learning disabilities.

GCM showed residents how to take a three-minute air sample using a five-gallon plastic bucket device, approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The device is capable of detecting up to 88 toxic gases from odours in the air.

The bucket device allows the community to take an air sample as soon as an accident occurs, rather than waiting for the Ministry of the Environment to get involved, said Ada Lockridge, chair of the reserve's environment committee.

When taking a sample, residents were advised to log the time, smell, wind direction and any physical reactions such as teary eyes.

The samples will then be sent to a California lab which identifies and tests concentrations of chemicals such as benzene, butadiene, styrene and sulphur.

Results will be analyzed according to internationally recognized screening levels set by health professionals.

Denny Larson, executive director of Global Community Monitor, said unfortunately, many countries haven't set offsite concentration limits for most toxic chemicals.

"As soon as you cross the workline, the worker isn't protected in his own home."

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Ada Lockridge, left, and Naomi Oliver take a practice air sample at the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve.

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