



TALKING ABOUT AIR QUALITY

Background

Making decisions about risks associated with contaminants in our air requires many different kinds of information: scientific information on the types of contaminants, how much people are exposed to, and if this poses a risk to people's health, for example. However, information on what is important to people in the area, and the types of concerns they have, is also important.

In May of 2005, a telephone survey was conducted of residents in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about how people feel about the air emissions from the oil sands operations around them and other sources in the area. People were also asked how they would like to be involved in helping to decide the best way to manage the potential risk from both current and future oil sands operations.

This survey was conducted by Dr. Cindy Jardine of the University of Alberta and Dr. Irene Wenger. These researchers were assisting the members of the Trace Metals and Air Contaminants (or TMAC) working group of the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (or CEMA) to help them better understand community perspectives on this issue. TMAC is responsible for evaluating the risks posed to human health and ecosystems from trace metals and air contaminants under present-day environmental management systems. If required, they also recommend changes to manage these risks.

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Who Participated?

A total of 404 people participated in the survey, half of these were male and half were female. All participants were over 18 years of age. Some of the interesting facts about the people surveyed are:

- 59% were between 18 and 44 years old
- 40% have jobs related to the oil and gas sector
- 58% lived in a home with 2 adults (no children)
- 36% had lived in the area less than 6 years



Many survey participants work in the oil and gas sector

Air Quality and Health Concerns

Survey participants were asked to rate the air quality in their area on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being “very poor,” 7 being “very good,” and 4 being “neither good nor bad.” More than half of the people (57%) felt that the air quality in their area was good to very good (rating it as 5 or higher on the 7 point scale), while twenty per cent rated it as poor (3 or lower).

Almost half of the people surveyed (48%) admitted to having concerns about their health related to air quality in the area, with 35% of these concerned about asthma, allergies and skin conditions.

“My children, my babies all have asthma, it was never an issue until we moved here. I know it’s really high here in kids.”

A large majority (75%) of the people with concerns felt that they do not have enough information to fully understand the impact of air quality on their health. They would like more information on air quality and air monitoring results, as well as the potential effects these contaminants have on health.

Air Quality and Environmental Concerns

Fifty-eight per cent of the people surveyed expressed concerns about potential adverse effects of air quality on the environment, with most being concerned about general affects on wildlife, fish, vegetation and water quality. Again, the majority of those people with concerns (71%) felt that they did not have enough information to understand the potential impact to the environment.

“They’re developing the community so fast, cutting down trees, everything seems different. There’s nothing to stop the wind from blowing things around. Even if chemicals come blowing in from the plant they would have been stopped before by bush...”



Oil sands operations.

A large number of people with health concerns (60%) or environmental concerns (45%) related to air quality worry about these more than any other health or environmental concerns in their life. Fifty-four people had raised their concerns with government or industry; the majority of these people were dissatisfied to some degree with the response they received.



Some people in the area enjoy healthy outdoor activities

Health Benefits

More than half of the people surveyed (60%) felt there were no health benefits from living in the area. Those who felt that there were health benefits thought these were because they were living close to the wilderness and therefore had opportunities to participate in a variety of outdoor activities. Interestingly, twenty-one people cited better air quality as a major health benefit of living in the region.

Community Involvement and Communication

People would like to be involved in the process through increased community awareness (17%), participation in surveys (14%), and through public advisory committees (12%). Quite a few people (17%) said they didn't know how people should be involved or chose not to answer this question.

When asked how they could be assured that TMAC had considered and incorporated their input into their recommendations for risk management, only two-thirds of the people surveyed provided a specific answer to this question. One quarter of all the people surveyed said they didn't know the answer to this question. The people who had a suggestion said that this could be achieved by having TMAC release the results from this public survey, or through release of information via the media.

“Drastic changes that occur as a result of this study would show that the TMAC group is serious and concerned about the environment”

People were also asked what type of information they would like to see about the program. Many people wanted to receive information on air quality and air monitoring results (17%). Others requested information on TMAC – “understandable information” – and/or copies of study results (each mentioned by 9% of the people surveyed).

Most people (63%) felt that the best way to get information to them was through mass media (newspaper, TV, and radio). Mail-outs were also viewed as an important way to get information (47% of people surveyed). Internet users considered the Web to be an important vehicle for information delivery; however, this was reported by only 12% of the survey participants. Holding meetings to discuss issues was mentioned by only 4% of the people.

The majority of the survey participants (59%) want communication to occur on a regular basis with the public, with most wanting this on a monthly basis. Others (37%) would like communication with them to occur only at key times in the process, ideally when something important was found.

People were obviously interested in the survey – 69%, or 279 people, requested a copy of these survey results.

Recommendations

Based on what was learned from people in this survey, the researchers made the following recommendations to TMAC:

Recommendation #1: Ensure people have access to relevant, complete, timely and understandable information on air quality and potential health effects.

TMAC should look at how air quality monitoring results produced by various parties (e.g. provincial government, industry, the Wood Buffalo Environmental Association) are currently being made available to the public. If necessary, TMAC should help establish a process whereby all air quality monitoring results could be made available to the public in a simple, comprehensive and understandable format.

TMAC should help develop materials summarizing what is currently known (and not known) about the potential effects of relevant air contaminants on human health and the environment. Again, these materials should be produced in a simple and understandable format.

TMAC should provide regular updates on its activities to its various stakeholders, including the public. TMAC should release new and significant findings in a timely manner.

Recommendation #2: Establish mechanisms to involve the public in the full process, starting with defining what problems need to be addressed.

TMAC should establish a separate Public Advisory Committee as part of the overall TMAC process, and/or include members of the public as part of the TMAC membership. This would greatly help to make the process clear to everyone. It would also provide an opportunity for the public to learn more about air contaminants and provide their input into the process to manage the risks.

Questions? Comments? Would you like a copy of the full report?

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More information and the full report can also be found on the Web!
www.cemaonline.ca
