

“When I started as a health aide, I had one patient as an asthmatic. This was almost 20 years ago, now I know of about 75. I have also seen an increase in thyroid disease and breast cancer. These problems multiplied as oil development spread. During winter evenings, for instance, asthma attacks followed a pattern that pointed to causes other than the commonly recognized trigger of indoor smoking. I was often called to treat asthma patients during cold inversions, when a layer of ice fog hung over the North Slope. On those same evenings there was noticeable gas flaring in the oil fields.”

Rosemary Ahtuanguak, current mayor of Nuiqsut.

OIL DEVELOPMENT AND ITS THREAT TO OUR NATIVE HEALTH AND WAY OF LIFE

From extraction to transportation and refining to end-use, the industrial processing of oil and gas is one of the most toxic and dangerous in modern times. The Prudoe Bay oil fields and Trans-Alaska Pipeline have caused an average of 423 spills annually on the North Slope. There were 2,958 spills between 1996 and 2002 totaling more than 1.7 million gallons of toxic substances, most commonly diesel, crude oil and hydraulic oil. Measured in amount of toxics released into the environment, Alaska ranks as the fourth most polluted state in the country in terms of releases required to be reported by the EPA National Toxic Release Inventory.

Every link in oil production’s “Chain of Destruction” generates profound damage to local communities and their environment. This disproportionately impacts Alaska Natives living on the North Slope to dangerous hazards that include:

Seismic exploration disturbance

Emissions and production of drilling muds and wastes during extraction of regulated pollutants include 1,470

tons of sulphur dioxide, 6,199 tons of particulate matter, 11,560 tons of carbon monoxide and 2,647 tons of volatile organic compounds are emitted annually. North Slope oil facilities release large quantities of gases, including 24,000 metric tons of methane and 7.3 to 40 million metric tons of carbon dioxide are emitted annually.

Toxic spills at every stage of the process – from drilling, to pipelines and processing. Forty different substances from acid to waste oil, have been spilled during routine operations.

Alaskan oil field development (including seismic exploration trails, gravel mines, roads, drill pads, pipelines, processing facilities, operating and housing facilities, and waste and sewer treatment plants) stretch across 1,000 square miles of tundra, and account for 1,100 miles of pipeline and 22,000 acres of gravel-filled wetlands. Nearly equal to Rhode Island in size, this represents one of the largest industrial complexes in the world.

Alarming Health Decline among Native Peoples

The health of Alaska Natives has steadily declined since oil and gas development first began over thirty years ago. Alaska Natives trying to maintain their fishing and land-based cultures, have been losing an uphill battle against a ‘soup mixture’ of invisible toxic intruders entering their bodies through their food source, air, land and water.

Exxon Valdez cleanup efforts, for example, involved working with both crude oil and strong solvents. Immediately after the cleanup, workers have been found to have traces of oil in their lungs, blood cells and fatty tissue and experienced symptoms such as breathing problems, headaches, chemical burns and nausea. More than a decade later many of the workers are still experience long-term health effects, such as respiratory illnesses, that they believe can be attributed to their time at Valdez. Court records show that Exxon never reported any of the more than 6,700 cases of respiratory illnesses among workers involved in the cleanup of the Valdez oil spill to federal and state oversight agencies, so no long-term monitoring program was implemented. So far there has been no official effort to track the health of the workers in this most public cleanup, let alone among the thousands of spills that occur on an annual basis.

What we do know is that communities living along side oil production and refining sites suffer irreversible health impacts from long term exposure to spent chemicals (nitrous

oxides, benzene, sulfuric acid, and ammonia). Nitrogen oxide emissions from Prudhoe Bay oilfields were 56,427 tons in one year (June 1994 to June 1995), twice the total emitted in Washington D.C. (This does not include emissions from production facilities at Kuparuk, Alpine, Badami or Pt. McIntyre oil fields, or new projects such as Northstar). Nitrogen oxides (NOx) can irritate the lungs, cause bronchitis, pneumonia, and pulmonary edema, and lower resistance to respiratory infections like influenza. Asthma, almost nonexistent in the Alaska Native population twenty years ago, has experienced a sharp increase. By 2001, asthma rates for Natives rose to about 70 percent higher than those in the non-Native population. (IHS)

Another alarming statistic relates to Alaska Native infant mortality, and which is double that of the general U.S. population, mostly due to an increase of sudden infant death syndrome. Native and other arctic region children are reported to have a higher-than-usual rate of certain infectious diseases, including pneumonia. Cancer, a disease rarely seen in Alaska during the 1950s, became the leading cause of death in Alaska in the 1990s, accounting for 25 percent of all fatalities. In addition, cancer mortality among Alaska Natives is 30% higher than the U.S. and Alaska averages. Although no one has yet linked such information to environmental contaminants, they are suspect. All these impacts are rampant in communities near oil production and refinery facilities.

Diabetes has also increased among Alaska Natives over the past decade as traditional food lifestyles shift to a more dominant Western-style diet. The prevalence of diabetes among Alaska Natives is currently similar to that of whites, and increasing at a higher rate than in the U.S. population as a whole. Since diabetes and high blood pressure weaken the immune system, a large percentage of Alaska Natives find themselves at higher risk of toxic exposure.

Negative Impact on Native Cultures

“Now that Nuiqsut is surrounded by newly developed fields and exploration activities, we get caribou and fish, but they’re not as good. The caribou aren’t fat, and some of the fish taste funny.”

- Rosemary Ahtuanguaruk

People like Rosemary aren’t alone in these concerns. Several hunters have reported the quality of caribou living near oil fields was poor, that the meat had a lower fat content, and that they’ve had to travel farther to find caribou in recent years.

Oil and Gas Development:

596 miles of gravel roads in the North Slope by 2003

Impact on wildlife and Habitat:

Caribou herds changing migration patterns, calving females particularly sensitive and likely to avoid roads.

Impact on subsistence:

Hunters forced to search further from home. Reduced quality of meat.

Oil and Gas Exploration:

Use of noisy seismic surveys to search for oil.

Impact on Wildlife Habitat:

Whales shifting migration patterns.

Impact on Subsistence:

Hunters forced to search further from home. Reduced catches and increasingly dangerous.

Oil and Gas Development:

Spills and other toxic releases

Impact on Wildlife Habitat:

Toxics accumulate in animal tissues.

Impact on Subsistence:

Confusing and contradictory fish consumption warnings. Shifts in eating patterns impacts nutrition and health (rise in diabetes, obesity, etc).

Oil and Gas Development:

Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons in Prince William Sound in 1989.

Impact on Wildlife Habitat:

In 2002, 6 species listed as recovered, 6 recovering, 7 not recovering, and another 5 whose recovery is still unknown.

Impact on Subsistence:

Shifts in local hunting and eating patterns, impacts nutrition and health (rise in diabetes, obesity, etc).

Climate Change Impacts:

So far, arctic ice in the summer has decreased by 40 percent, sea level has risen by .2 meters overall, snow cover has decreased by 10 percent, 4.2 million acres of the forest in Alaska is dying because the spruce beetles now can reproduce twice as fast, with a longer season, (and devastate the forest), vector borne diseases (West Nile fever for example) are on the increase, and each year the record number of disasters attributed to climate change has increased dramatically.

Impact on Subsistence:

The accumulative impacts of climate change on Alaska Natives health cannot be quantified. Environmental racism continues to impact their lives and culture, all for the benefit of American energy consumption.

“The caribou used to cross the river and pass near the village. We hardly see them anymore in the summer.”

- Archie Ahkiviana, Kuukpik Subsistence Oversight Panel, who attributes all these changes to increased oil development.

There are reports that some fish from the Colville River not only taste strange, but also pose a threat to the villagers. An old oil exploration and military site upriver has leaked toxics into the soil and water system, and a 1998 field investigation found barium, diesel, benzene, xylene, lead, and PCBs at levels exceeding human health standards. The liver of one bottom-feeding fish, the burbot, is considered a delicacy by Native elders, but sampling revealed elevated PCB levels in some fish near the contaminated site. Because toxics concentrate in the liver, the Alaska Native Health Board recommended that Nuiqsut residents eat no more than five burbot livers per year. The cumulative affect of PCB's, hydrocarbons, heavy metals and other bioaccumulative toxics in the environment is a concern that Alaska Natives, state, federal agencies and Native non-profit/non-governmental organizations are beginning to address.

Call to Action

“Oil companies that seek access to the resources on our Alaska Native lands follow a specific method of operation when dealing with our communities and leaders. This method has been proven to work toward their interests. When we look at the methods the companies have used in

South America, it is no different than the methods companies' use in Alaska or other Indigenous lands elsewhere. At first, when they are looking to get into a new area, they make lots of promises such as saying their operations will be small, but inevitably they spread into vast areas. The corrupt business of the oil companies leave our peoples with the legacy of broken trust, destruction of our homelands, our health and violations of our inherent fundamental human rights. These companies have no conscience, they do not have our best interest in mind, they only seek to market our riches and make a profit at the expense of our people, lands and future generations.”

- Faith Gemmill, Gwich'in from Arctic Village

There is a powerful movement of Alaska Natives who are challenging the oil industry and demanding their rights to a safe and healthy environment conducive to subsistence. The RED OIL network consists of grassroots Alaska Natives of the Inupiat, Yupik, Aleut, Tlingit, Gwich'in, Eyak and Denaiana Athabascan tribes. This Alaska-based network aims to address the human and ecological health impacts brought on by the unsustainable development practices of the fossil fuel industry. RED OIL strongly supports self-determination rights of tribes in Alaska, as well as a just transition from fossil fuel development to sustainable economies, and promotes the implementation of sustainable development on or near Alaska Native lands. RED OIL is part of the Indigenous Environmental Network. ■

**For more information on how to get involved with REDOIL,
please go to www.ienearth.org**

**or call Clayton Thomas-Muller,
IEN Indigenous Oil Campaign Organizer,
at (604) 683-4702 or email at ienoil@igc.org or
in Alaska call Dune Lankard, REDOIL Co-facilitator at Phone: (907) 424-5890
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