

Sarnia's emissions affecting health, study says

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Sarnia is fabled as Canada's chemical valley because of its many petroleum plants, but a new study says the community's industrial prosperity has a dark side: The area is the most polluted in Ontario when it comes to smokestack emissions.

The study, by Ecojustice Canada, an environmental group, also makes the controversial assertion that pollution is so severe in the city and a nearby native reserve that the health of the 130,000 people living in the area is being harmed due to exposure to such harmful substances as mercury, dioxins and volatile organic compounds.

"The toll these emissions are taking is dramatic and there is growing evidence that the health of the residents of Sarnia and Aamjiwnaang First Nation and the local environment has been severely compromised," says the study, a copy of which has been obtained by The Globe and Mail.

According to the study, which is being released today, the cluster of plants in and around the Southwestern Ontario city released more dangerous chemicals into the air in 2005 than all the industries in Manitoba or New Brunswick or Saskatchewan, based on federal pollution data.

Among the worrisome health developments it cited were an excessive rate of girls' births compared to boys for native women living on the reserve near the chemical plants; a toll of asbestos-related diseases among Sarnia workers, considered one of the highest in the world; and an incidence of leukemia among women aged 25 to 44 in the county that is double the provincial rate.

"We're exposing the human population, on almost like a huge clinical trial, to these very high levels of toxic substances," said Jim Brophy, director of Sarnia's Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers, which in recent years has treated hundreds of workers for medical problems related to dangerous chemical exposures.

The clinic, along with several community groups, has been lobbying to have the health of area residents studied to see what effects pollution might be having, but Mr. Brophy said no level of government has been willing to commit funding for such a review.

An association representing major chemical companies in the area, the Sarnia- Lambton Environmental Association, declined to comment yesterday on the adverse health claims until the study is publicly released.

Elaine MacDonald, one of the study's authors and senior scientist at Ecojustice, said Sarnia's plants, which represent about 40 per cent of the country's chemical manufacturing, are often located near housing, without much of a buffer zone to separate residents from

industry. Ministry of Environment spokesman John Steele said the province plans to place more air-monitoring equipment in the area, and in 2005 it tightened pollution standards.

How they stack up

Industrial air pollution releases by Ontario cities and selected provinces, 2005.

City Pollutants (tonnes)

Sarnia 5,669

Sudbury 4,574

Hamilton 3,334

Toronto 2,829

Oshawa 1,939

Windsor 1,308

Kitchener 1,229

Thunder Bay 1,201

Prov., Terr. Pollutants (tonnes)

Man. 3,966

N.B. 3,519

Sask. 3,177

N.S. 2,998

Nfld. 1,061

NWT 210

PEI 72

Nun. 33

SOURCE: ECOJUSTICE CANADA BASED ON ENVIRONMENT CANADA NPRI 2005 DATA AND POLLUTIONWATCH.ORG