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Chair

Mrs. Deborah Schulte

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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● (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Deborah Schulte (King—Vaughan, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I would like to start by welcoming three of the groups that are here today with us. There is a little bit of chatter, so I'm going to wait until we all settle down. I'm glad we're all in such good moods.

An hon. member: It is week one.

The Chair: It's week one, and we have four to go.

I just want to welcome our guests today. We have three groups presenting to us.

We have the Native Women's Association of Canada, with Lynne....

Ms. Lynne Groulx (Executive Director, Native Women's Association of Canada): I'm Lynne Groulx.

The Chair: Lynne is the executive director.

We have Verna McGregor, the environment and climate change project officer. Welcome. Thank you for being with us today.

We have, from the Mikisew Cree First Nation, Melody....

Ms. Melody Lepine (Director, Government and Industry Relations, Mikisew Cree First Nation): I'm Melody Lepine.

The Chair: Melody is the director of government and industry relations. Welcome. We also have Phil Thomas, who is a scientist with them.

We have Gabriel Miller, from the Canadian Cancer Society. Welcome. He is the vice-president of public issues, policy, and cancer information. We have Sara Trotta—I hope I said that right—the senior coordinator of public issues. Welcome all of you.

We'll start with the Mikisew Cree First Nation, if you wouldn't mind. You're first up. We're going to have 10 minutes of deputation. We'll have each of the groups do their deputations. Then we'll have rounds of questioning after that.

If I hold up a yellow card, it means that you have one minute left, just to give you a bit of a warning. Once the red card goes up, you're over the time. It doesn't mean to just stop what you're saying, but wrap it up in an expeditious way, if you could, please. We'll be doing that through the questioning as well.

Thank you very much. The floor is yours.

Ms. Melody Lepine: Thank you. I believe copies of my presentation have been provided to everyone. I just want to confirm. Thank you.

First of all, thank you for inviting me to speak as part of your review of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. My name is Melody Lepine, and I am a member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation.

I will begin with slide number 2. You should see a map.

The Mikisew Cree nation is a signatory to Treaty 8 in northeastern Alberta. We are the largest first nation within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, which is primarily the area called the Athabasca oil sands region of Canada. The community that I am from is just downstream. A large majority of our members occupy today a small community called Fort Chipewyan. It's actually the oldest settlement in Alberta.

There are about 800 or 900 members who reside in Fort Chipewyan. A large portion of our members still occupy their traditional territories, which today are referred to as the Wood Buffalo National Park and the Peace-Athabasca Delta, as well as along the Athabasca River, where there is extensive oil sands mining and development occurring today.

With me is Phil Thomas. Phil is one of the scientists who work for Environment and Climate Change Canada. He has done some studies that he is going to refer to at the end of the presentation, and he is going to assist me with some of the technical questions that we may have about the things I'm going to discuss here today.

Some of you may already be aware that this area, specifically within Wood Buffalo National Park, which is also a UNESCO world heritage site, has been a concern for many of the indigenous people within the region. I represent one of five first nations within the region. The Mikisew Cree, being the largest, filed a petition about two years ago with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, asking for the site to be listed as “in danger”.

One of the reasons we filed a petition to the World Heritage Committee requesting the “in danger” listing is one of the subject matters I am discussing today, which is the increasing levels of contamination within the region.

Wood Buffalo National Park was listed as a world heritage site because of its having one of the world's largest freshwater deltas, the Peace-Athabasca Delta. The Peace River feeds the delta from B.C., where there are extensive hydroelectric projects, and the Athabasca flows from the Athabasca glaciers in the mountains within Jasper National Park.

There is extensive oil sands development along the Athabasca River, and the contaminants that Phil and I will be discussing today would be mostly PAHs and a bit of mercury.

I will turn to slide number 3.

Like many other indigenous communities throughout Canada, the Mikisew Cree occupies traditional territories. We strive to protect the area. We continue to hunt, fish, and trap, and to exercise our treaty rights within the area. The health of our environment is really critical to the health of the community—the physical health, the spiritual health, and the mental health.

One concern that has been growing within my community of Fort Chipewyan is the increasing occurrence of rare cancers. You may have heard, from the headlines in the past several years, that Dr. O'Connor, a physician within our community, was accused of raising undue alarm because of witnessing the increasing levels of cancers.

The community feels that the increase in the levels of cancers and a lot of these rare autoimmune diseases has a direct link to the oil sands development and the increasing levels of pollution flowing downstream to our community.

We have little choice but to have confidence that our traditional foods and our environment are healthy. We rely on pieces of legislation like the act that you are reviewing to protect and safeguard our environment, to allow for it to be healthy so that we can continue to sustain ourselves, eat our traditional foods, practice our treaty rights, and pass on our culture to future generations.

● (1545)

On slide 4, you'll see a table. There's not a lot of monitoring within the region, and there have been very few studies.

We did undertake a traditional food biomonitoring study. It was done out of the University of Manitoba with Dr. Stéphane McLachlan. One of the things we did was survey a number of community members about their perception. How did they feel about the foods they were consuming? Were they worried about the state of the environment and the health of the ecosystems and the water?

Many members do not drink water from the rivers anymore. They're witnessing a changing environment. The table really represents the fear among the community members, as well as their concern for the state of the environment, the health of their wildlife, and the foods that they're consuming, such as the berries. The table is from the study, and we can supply you with the biomonitoring study if you'd like to examine some of those results a little further. That study actually was funded in part by Health Canada through the northern contaminants program.

Slide 5 shows some examples of what some of the community members are seeing. Mikisew has also started a community-based monitoring program within its community. We started community-based monitoring within our territory in and around Fort Chipewyan, specifically within the delta, because there is no monitoring occurring there. A lot of the monitoring is done upstream; it is focused on where a lot of the development happens. However, we are seeing a changing environment downstream. Fort Chipewyan is just about 200 kilometres from Fort McMurray. We have elders and traditional land users observing, and what they see is very unusual, so we started a monitoring program, and we are now collecting data and sharing the results with both the federal and provincial governments. We are trying to understand why these changes are happening.

For example, we are seeing numerous fish kills. In the spring, the elders go out to Lake Claire in the delta, and they're seeing hundreds of fish floating around. There have also been occurrences of a lot of seagulls dying off. We're seeing things like rabbits with extra genitals. There's a photo that you'll see later on of deformed fish. We really don't understand why these things are happening; we just know that they are happening.

Some of the results that we are collecting from our monitoring indicate increasing levels of contaminants. They link people and health in terms of increasing cancers and some of these rare diseases that our communities have never experienced before. You see the changes that they're seeing in their traditional foods: fish, moose meat, rabbits, ducks, muskrat, and everything that we rely on—subsistence living. It's not just our constitutional right to exercise hunting, fishing, and trapping; it's also a part of our culture.

Things like mercury, lead, silver, cadmium, arsenic, selenium, zinc, and chromium are all very dangerous substances to be consuming. We're actually seeing their levels exceed the CCME guidelines.

Phil, maybe you can speak about the next slide.

Mr. Phil Thomas (Scientist, Mikisew Cree First Nation): Slide 6 basically speaks to increased depositional patterns of mercury in the northern environments of Fort McMurray and into the Peace-Athabasca Delta where the people of the Mikisew Cree First Nation are living. This slide speaks about mercury, but like mercury, other substances—like PAHs, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which are carcinogenic, mutagenic, and teratogenic compounds—are also increasing. They also have deposition patterns similar to what you're seeing with the mercury trends. Together, this complex soup of contaminants is of concern to the communities that rely on healthy wildlife and healthy waters for subsistence.

Ms. Melody Lepine: Slide 7 shows the photo I was referring to earlier of some skin lesions on some fish. This is just one of many fish that we catch like this.

With regard to the PAHs, I'll ask Phil to elaborate a bit on them and on why they are of concern to us. There are natural PAHs within the region, but there are also unnatural sources of PAHs. As a result, there have been numerous Environment Canada studies within the region that show increasing levels of PAHs and other contaminants. This one is of real concern, because this is where we will provide you with some recommendations. It seems very obvious to us and to the community that there's a direct correlation between these increasing levels of PAHs and the changes in the health of the fish that we are consuming.

● (1550)

The Chair: I want to ask the committee's indulgence. We're a little over the time, and we have a few more slides to go.

Are we okay to go over time? You're good?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Please continue.

Ms. Melody Lepine: Okay.

I'll just turn it over to slide 8 and ask Phil to maybe link the PAH increases with your review of the act.

Mr. Phil Thomas: To be brief, we've mentioned that PAHs are carcinogenic, teratogenic, and immunogenic compounds, especially when they're being metabolized. It's those metabolites that are the toxic principles in those mixtures. With the fish, we're seeing increased incidence of liver tumours and neoplasm skin lesions that are scaring the community.

Basically, under current regulations and legislation, we usually focus on only 16 PAHs. Those are the parent compounds that are found on the U.S. EPA list of priority substances. Those are the compounds we're actually finding in lower quantities in the environment. When you're looking at any environmental sample, be it water, biota, or sediments, you're finding that over 95% of all PAHs are actually the alkylated forms of those compounds. With PAHs, there are thousands of different compounds, and we're finding the majority of them are currently not listed under priority substances lists.

Mikisew is working hard to recommend the inclusion of some of these compounds, especially the alkylated PAHs, on the priority substances list, and also more meaningful monitoring in addressing the complexities around exposure to these complex environmental mixtures of PAHs and other heavy metals, as they've presented.

Ms. Melody Lepine: To summarize, with the efforts of the federal government moving toward reconciliation with indigenous people, here's an opportunity to include, for example, the Mikisew Cree, in terms of our request to include these additional PAHs, and to include us in further research and monitoring to understand how these PAHs are affecting our health and our way of life.

I think I'll end it there and take any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There will be more time to go into detail during questions.

Next we'll move to Native Women's Association of Canada. The floor is yours.

Ms. Lynne Groulx: Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and committee members, distinguished witnesses, and guests.

My name is Lynne Groulx. I am the executive director of the Native Women's Association of Canada. I am here today with Verna McGregor, NWAC's environmental and climate change project officer.

First I would like to acknowledge the Algonquin nation, whose territory we are on today.

Thank you for the opportunity to present. I am a Métis woman of mixed Algonquin and French descent. I bring with me the voices of my ancestors, the concerns of aboriginal women from across Canada, and the hopes of our future leaders, our youth.

NWAC is the only national aboriginal organization in Canada that represents the interests and concerns of aboriginal women specifically. NWAC is made up of provincial and territorial member associations from across our country. Our network of first nations and Métis women spans the north, south, east, and west, in urban and rural and on- and off-reserve communities.

We have three key messages that we would like to deliver today.

First, indigenous women have an important role in environmental issues. From a traditional understanding, the health of indigenous women cannot be separated from the health of our environment, the practice of our spirituality, and the expression of our inherent right to self-determination, upon which the mental, physical, and social health of our communities is based.

Historically, indigenous women had traditional roles in passing on the knowledge and traditions around being stewards of the land. Today, despite the impacts of colonization and increased urbanization, indigenous women have retained their close relationship to the land and the responsibility for caring for and nurturing the land. It is no coincidence that it was women who started the Idle No More movement in 2013 to protect the water in our country. Each year, our grandmothers walk around the Great Lakes to honour and protect the water.

As indigenous women, we have witnessed the impacts of environmental degradation and resource development without proper consideration for people or the environment, as well as rapid changes in weather and climate. Indigenous women are often the first ones to observe and experience the impacts of climate change and are more likely to become climate refugees.

The list of vulnerable populations provided by Health Canada places indigenous women and children within all or most of the categories of vulnerable segments of the Canadian population to be negatively impacted by climate change. Indigenous women can be found in low-income groups, groups with pre-existing health problems, groups who live off the land or have a cultural reliance on the environment, and in the northern residents group.

We have seen the impact of climate change around the world: the degradation of already poor housing, increased susceptibility to diseases because of fresh water shortages and mould in houses, increased costs of energy sources, and air and water pollution, all of which are impacting our health.

There is also the issue of the change in the range, number, and health of animals, fish, and plant species, which impacts access to both the traditional food supply and the traditional medicine supply. The changes in hunting and harvesting practices also change traditional dietary foods and decrease access to traditional medicines.

The second key message is that there is a need for an indigenous and gender-specific perspective in revamping the Environmental Protection Act. Upon our internal review of the legislation, we found only two references pertaining to aboriginal peoples. There is one specific reference in the preamble, which states:

> Whereas the Government of Canada recognizes the importance of endeavouring, in cooperation with provinces, territories and aboriginal peoples, to achieve the highest level of environmental quality for all Canadians and ultimately contribute to sustainable development;

The second reference is found in the interpretation section of the act, which recognizes "existing aboriginal and treaty rights" and is basically an incorporation of subsection 35(1) of the Constitution Act of 1982. We find that these two references are wholly insufficient, in particular because indigenous women are not explicitly mentioned anywhere.

Numerous national and international studies and research have shown that including indigenous women in decision-making with regard to environmental protection and sustainable development leads to greater protection of genetic resources, such as forests, species at risk, and bodies of water.

● (1555)

This is explicitly noted in the United Nations Development Programme of 2011.

Within Canada, it is crucial that indigenous women be part of the discussions on environment and climate change with the different levels of government and other stakeholders. Engagement and consultations must be more than cursory; they must be meaningful. This issue of consultation has already been thoroughly canvassed by the courts in recent years. Indigenous women also need to be recognized for the leaders that they already are on the issue of climate change in Canada.

NWAC believes there is a need to support more research and development of risk-reduction strategies for indigenous women and children and to support the development and delivery of emergency preparedness techniques and strategies for indigenous women and families.

At the international level, the inclusion of indigenous women's traditional knowledge in the creation of international agreements, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Paris agreement, will most certainly help to ensure that the sustainable development goals are achieved.

The third and final key message is that the revamping of the legislation needs to be done in compliance with and respect of the principles that are set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Most specifically, we refer to paragraph 2 of article 32 of the UNDRIP, which says that "free, prior and informed consent should be the precondition for state approval of 'any project' affecting Indigenous peoples' lands, territories and resources."

This also means free and prior consent of indigenous women, not just indigenous men.

In addition, specifically articles 21 and 22 of UNDRIP refer to the particular needs of indigenous women and say that states should take effective measures to ensure the continuing improvement of their social and economic conditions.

In conclusion, there are three points we want to make to you.

First, women have an important role. Second, we believe that a gender and an indigenous perspective needs to be included. Third, we believe that consideration needs to be given to the principles of UNDRIP in this review.

Thank you.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

It was interesting that both of you started your presentation off with pretty well the same sentence: that your health cannot be separated from the environment. This is kind of interesting.

We have the Canadian Cancer Society up next. The floor is now yours.

Mr. Gabriel Miller (Vice-President, Public Issues, Policy and Cancer Information, Canadian Cancer Society): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

It's a great honour to be here with you folks.

Before I begin, I just want to say that we prepared to come to speak to you today in particular about asbestos, but we know that the task before you goes well beyond that material.

The Canadian Cancer Society is interested in the work that you're doing in all areas to protect the health of Canadians. We're working closely with researchers, for instance, at the Occupational Cancer Research Centre to look at a broad range of potential risks to Canadians. We look forward to continuing the conversation after today and taking any questions that come up in this discussion that we can answer back to the society so that we can return on another occasion and keep talking with you.

I want to begin with a few words about the Cancer Society.

It is Canada's largest national health charity. We have 132,000 volunteers across the country, more than a million donors, and it's a privilege to be here speaking on their behalf.

We commend the committee for undertaking a comprehensive review of the Environmental Protection Act. It is critical tool for protecting our citizens. Sara and I are not experts on the act, but we believe that its treatment of at least one substance must be strengthened. That substance is asbestos, and likely there are others.

It's time Canada adopted a comprehensive approach to this dangerous and unnecessary material. It's time to ban any new use of asbestos across our economy and to take action to reduce the risks of being exposed to wherever asbestos already exists in our communities. Again, what's required is a comprehensive approach, and in the next couple of moments we'll describe what that means to us, including key changes that we feel should be made to the Environmental Protection Act.

First I'd like to share a few words about the danger that asbestos continues to pose to the country.

Some people are surprised to hear that asbestos regulations in this country are still inadequate. They may have assumed that we had finally put this issue to rest after so many years and after so many fatalities. Surely Canadians must think that we closed this long and painful chapter when the last asbestos mine was closed four years ago, but it isn't over—not yet. We haven't solved our asbestos problem, despite the progress we've made. As a country, we have unfinished business, and this committee can help us complete it.

Here are a few facts.

Asbestos is the number one cause of work-related death in Canada. This year alone, more than 2,300 Canadians will be told they have cancer, in part because they were exposed to asbestos. In fact, the number of Canadians diagnosed with asbestos-related cancers continues to rise today due to exposure over the past 20, 30, and 40 years. However, what might be most shocking is that 150,000 Canadian workers are still exposed to asbestos every year in Canada. Those are people at risk today in 2016.

As I said at the start, a comprehensive approach is required. It would consist of at least three elements, and these may well not be exhaustive.

First, the Environmental Protection Act should ban all asbestos-containing products, including commercial piping and automotive brake pads. Their use, manufacture, import, and export must end. This will reduce exposure among today's workers, protect future workers, and send a clear message about the dangers of this material.

Second, the federal government must work with provinces and territories to mitigate the dangers posed by asbestos that is already present in our communities and our workplaces. This must include registries and other systems to track where asbestos exists in buildings, beginning with the buildings owned and operated by government itself. We would include in that all public buildings, including schools, hospitals, and others.

Third, both levels of government must work together to develop a comprehensive strategy to transition our country to a post-asbestos future. That means taking action internationally by signing the Rotterdam Convention, but more importantly, it means taking action inside our own borders by making sure that regulations not only exist but are enforced for the safe detection and removal of asbestos wherever it exists.

Canada has made progress on asbestos, but our work is not done. We are encouraged by the government's commitment to tackle the issue and we look forward to working with all parties in the House of Commons to put a comprehensive solution in place. We hope this committee will take this opportunity to support a ban on asbestos through the Environmental Protection Act. It's time that we joined the 50 countries around the world that have banned this material. It's the right thing to do, and Canadians will thank you for it.

● (1605)

We look forward to your questions. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all of you, and we'll start right into the questions.

We'll start with Mr. Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): I will be fairly brief and ask for brief responses. I have six minutes only.

To the Canadian Cancer Society, I found the testimony of our indigenous witnesses compelling. It made me think that I'm going to put CCS on the spot here a bit.

What kind of programming does CCS have in relation to vulnerable populations, such as indigenous communities where cancers are being found? It's not news. In Fort Chip, this has been reported for years and years. They've been on a crusade to help figure out the problems there. Is the CCS a contributor when it comes to engaging on cancer in vulnerable communities?

Ms. Sara Trotta (Senior Coordinator, Public Issues, Canadian Cancer Society): A lot of the work that we do involves educating vulnerable communities, aboriginal peoples among them, about the importance of screening and cancer prevention.

We do a lot of work with aboriginal communities, for example, in Ontario, to promote the importance of screening, and we've seen a significant uptick in the rates of screening among people in our northern Ontario communities.

Mr. William Amos: Okay. That's interesting. That's on the detection side. Obviously from the perspective of our witnesses in Fort Chip, they're concerned about research being done to figure out what impacts industrial processes are having on them. I would suspect that their population is less interested in tests down the road and more interested in helping figure out what can be done to reduce the burden of chemicals that are mixing together.

Does CCS do research in relation to the mixing of various industrial compounds and the effects on isolated communities?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: The Cancer Society certainly funds research into environmental carcinogens and how industrial pollutants can increase the risk of cancer. I would say that right now our greatest focus in this area is on a group of carcinogens that Canadians are being exposed to primarily in the workplace, which includes asbestos, radon, and diesel fuels.

However, hearing the witnesses today, I was struck by some of the same things that you were. I think it gives us reason to go back and speak with our research team to get a good picture of exactly where we're funding research in this area.

Mr. William Amos: Mr. Miller, I appreciate that answer, and I think this group here would agree with me that CCS is a Canadian leader. It's an organization that Canada is very proud of. We look to CCS for leadership on issues related to environmental health, as well as the reconciliation aspects of that.

Turning now to our aboriginal witnesses, what I heard predominantly was compelling testimony around the need to ensure that CEPA focuses on vulnerable populations, and the need to ensure, from the native women's organization, a particular focus on women. I'm not sure how specific legislation would go to identify according to gender, but it's an interesting consideration for sure.

I wonder if you have comments on how, in particular, CEPA should be augmented, whether it's through legislative reform or through investments through CEPA implementation. How could vulnerable populations be better protected pursuant to the law or programs?

I guess I'd pose the same question to our friends form the Mikisew Cree community. In what way would you like to see CEPA augmented? What particular types of programs in your community would you like to see?

● (1610)

Ms. Melody Lepine: I can go first.

The Chair: You just have two minutes to answer, and we want the answer.

Ms. Melody Lepine: To me, when I look at environmental protection and any means or measures to protect the environment, it has to be inclusive of the people. The Mikisew Cree see ourselves as a component of our environment, so an indicator is us, just like indicators are clean water and healthy wildlife.

In terms of CEPA including indigenous knowledge, it would mean including us in their research, asking the questions and also finding the answers, and coming up with recommendations on solutions and how to address any specific problem, on any aspect of environmental protection. We really want to be part of everything that CEPA is mandated to do.

Ms. Lynne Groulx: I'm just going to speak for 30 seconds, and then Verna is also going to speak.

I want to mention that there is a kind of analysis that can be done of the actual legislation. When we say we do a gender-based analysis, we actually go through, clause by clause, and we review it through a gender and indigenous lens. We could actually do a review of it. It is possible to do it, and we'd like to see it done on this piece of legislation, if that's possible. NWAC has expertise for that.

That's from the legislative side, and then Verna had a comment.

Ms. Verna McGregor (Environment and Climate Change Project Officer, Native Women's Association of Canada): It is just an observation.

When I was listening to the presentation on asbestos, I was thinking about attending a conference a few months ago on heart disease. It was the first international conference on heart disease for women. As you know, heart disease affects women differently. If you're looking at, for example, banning asbestos, how does that impact women? Is there a difference similar to the way heart disease affects women?

I had another observation as well. Given the state of our communities and the socio-economic issues, an example in one area of the legislation is the action to prevent loss or compensate loss. Again, you keep in mind our economic positions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm very sorry to have to cut people off, because I know you've travelled all this way to be here with us, but we do have a very tight time schedule. I apologize for that in advance.

Mr. Eglinski is next.

Mr. Jim Eglinski (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses, the Canadian Cancer Society, Melody and Phil, and the ladies from the Native Women's Association.

My question is to Melody, my neighbour to the north. I've been watching with interest over the years what's taking place in your community. I've been there a number of times. It's a beautiful part of the world.

Unfortunately, I've lived up river from you on the Peace, and I now live on the McLeod, which dumps into the Athabaska, which flows to your community. In many communities, a lot of their sewage, after being treated, goes into the main river streams. It ends up in the Athabaska, ends up in the Peace, and you guys are at the end of the line.

Phil, I wonder whether research is being done on the water systems there. Environment Canada is the lead agency that allows the dumping into the river systems. We even see it on the Great Lakes here. There was a very recent case about two months ago.

Are there readings being done on the river that you know of, to look at the levels and how they're being affected further up, especially at the end of the system?

● (1615)

Mr. Phil Thomas: Thank you for your question.

Yes, Environment Canada is involved in monitoring the impacts of sewage effluents. I guess some of the main concerns with sewage effluents are about antibiotics, birth controls, and these kinds of endocrine disrupters, compounds that will disrupt the endocrine system or the hormone system.

They do monitoring. Usually sewage effluent is more of a localized problem. Within 50 kilometres of a source, you'll detect a signal, but soon after that.... They say that the solution to pollution is dilution. By the time it reaches the Peace–Athabasca Delta, those levels are near background levels, so it's not a huge concern.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Is industry in the area—and I'm going a bit south of you—working with your community in air monitoring and analyzing some of these systems or the PAHs that you have?

Ms. Melody Lepine: No.

The federal government and the provincial government did form the joint oil sands monitoring program, which all five indigenous groups within the region refused to participate in. There was no meaningful engagement. There's no inclusion of indigenous knowledge.

With the recent changes in government, there has now been an interest from both the provincial and federal governments for more meaningful inclusion from the indigenous communities, including incorporating our traditional knowledge and other aspects.

The discussions are starting, but to your question specifically, industry relies on government. The issues facing us are more cumulative in nature. They do their own site-specific monitoring. They look to the federal and provincial governments to monitor on the regional and more cumulative scale, and that's where we're running into some problems.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Do I have more time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: To the Canadian Cancer Society, thank you very much for the work you do. I sometimes say I'm a cancer survivor even though I've never had it, as I lost my mother, my father, both my in-laws, and my first wife to cancer. I've watched its devastation.

You mentioned one of my concerns just briefly. Sara, I think this question will probably go to you. It's about the education factor. My friend Martin was an educator for many years, and I think we need to work at getting the message out, probably not as much to the older people but to the younger kids in school.

Is there some type of national program or a program that you've worked on with the provinces to educate our younger people on the risks out there?

Ms. Sara Trotta: Through all our regions, we have outreach programs that partner with different community groups and go out and provide education to all different kinds of community groups, including school groups and young children.

On a broader national scale, we have a website called “It's My Life!”, which is a tool that can be used to help individuals better understand their cancer risk and how they can lower that risk. It educates people about what we call “modifiable risk factors”, exposures beyond your own heredity and genes, and it looks at things like tobacco use, alcohol intake, eating, and physical activity. It tries to provide education in a really simple way about how best to mitigate any risk you may have.

The Chair: You still have a minute.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: I'll let it move on.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, everyone, for being here today and for your testimony. It was very interesting.

● (1620)

[*Translation*]

For us, the matter raises many questions and considerations. As you know, last Wednesday there was a movement to relaunch the debate on the asbestos ban. Yesterday, my colleague Sheri Benson raised the issue.

Regarding the Prime Minister's promise last May to ban asbestos use, have you discussed the implementation of the ban with liberal government representatives?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

We have been talking to the government about this.

First of all, I think it is important to say how encouraged we have been that the conversation has started. To my knowledge, there was no discussion of asbestos before the election. The government came in with its mandate, and this issue was then brought out urgently in a public discussion. I think the government responded in a responsible way by saying that it would look at it, and it has since indicated that it intends on taking action.

I would also say that groups like ours have been waiting patiently, and then somewhat less patiently, to know what would happen next and what the timeline would be for action. We have now, I think, been assured that the minister of science is taking a lead within the government in terms of trying to take an across-government approach. We hope to be meeting with her soon, and we hope that we'll see a concrete timeline for a plan from the government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

I will now move on to the two other groups. Aboriginal ancestral knowledge was ignored for a certain period, but is being considered increasingly important. With regard to our current joint Canada-Alberta implementation plan for oil sands monitoring, I want to know whether you are part of this group and whether you were consulted. I learned about a study documenting an increase in cancer among aboriginal people in Alberta. However, a study published afterward alleged that the first study was in fact flawed.

What's happening?

Why is there always an effort to undermine the credibility of the studies published?

[*English*]

Ms. Melody Lepine: Alberta has developed an indigenous wisdom advisory panel. I'm now a member of that panel. The only reason I decided to join was that I've been pushing for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in environmental monitoring in the oil sands specifically for a very long time. Now they've passed a bill, and it's legislated that they will now include indigenous knowledge. I'm very happy about Alberta's efforts.

We've done community-based monitoring for the past eight years because there's never been any monitoring in our community. Everything we're finding in the changes has been excluded in monitoring by different levels of government and by industry as well. We took it upon ourselves to do our own monitoring. We have researchers and federal government scientists like Phil, who has done numerous different research projects within the community. We participate with scientists like Phil, who is saying they want to include our indigenous knowledge. I know in talking with him that he's also frustrated. There needs to be more research funding, more inclusion. We're just starting to see the interest, but it needs to be backed up with action, including things like what Alberta has done in passing legislation, to ensure inclusion of indigenous knowledge.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Do you want to add anything concerning aboriginal ancestral knowledge?

[*English*]

Ms. Verna McGregor: I can speak all day on ancestral knowledge.

As women, we have the connection to the water and this understanding that we are part of the earth and we go back to the earth, but also that 72.8% of our bodies are made of water. What we do to the land, we do to ourselves. That's our indigenous knowledge.

Sixty-seven per cent of our communities are in rural and remote locations. Again, they have this connection to the land, as opposed to approximately 80% of the population in urban environments. It's very sheltered, but if you're out on the land, you see the connection first-hand in the impact of contaminants. It's not only on the animals and the water, but also now in Alberta they're seeing it on ourselves and our children. That's where the women stand in terms of water, because we're also standing for our children and our responsibility here as human beings.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up is Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I apologize in advance if I cut you off. I'm very limited in my time. If you could keep your answers as brief as possible too, that would be great.

Mr. Miller, when you talked about asbestos being the number one cause of work-related death today, correct me if I'm wrong, but what you mean is that people who were exposed to it decades ago are still dying today. It would be the number one result of somebody being.... Am I getting that right?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: That's correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay. It's not the number one cause of what's happening today; it was caused decades ago.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes, your interpretation is right.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

You said 150,000 people are still being exposed today. Can you talk about who those people are, and how many of the 150,000 are not being exposed in a protected manner?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I can talk to you for sure about who makes up the group, and Sara may have a bit to add about that. Professions where there's a high level of exposure are construction, auto mechanics, some manufacturing—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: An auto mechanic would be exposed because it's in brake pads, but asbestos is fused into the brake pads, so it's not really dangerous. Would you agree that there's probably more asbestos being released into the air at an intersection because people are hitting the brakes, as opposed to what people are experiencing in a car mechanic's shop? They're just taking the brake pads out of the box and installing them.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: No, the greater risk for auto mechanics is removing old brakes that contain asbestos.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: When they come off, they release quite a bit of asbestos dust. I don't have a definitive answer for you of what percentage of those people are—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Doing it in a responsible way?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes, but I can tell you that the work we've done with the Occupational Cancer Research Centre makes it very clear that we're relying more on people taking safety measures in the workplace than we really should be. Each of those requirements is one more barrier to safety and is another opportunity for something to get missed, and the risk to the worker could be increased.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Do you think that part of the solution is ensuring that we have proper procedures in place to make sure the people who are dealing with these substances are properly educated, so that when mechanics are removing the brake pad, they know the proper procedure to ensure that they're not exposed?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I'll let Sara add to this, but again—this is from the work of the research centre—obviously when there's a trade-off between a risk and a benefit, then it's important to do whatever you can to encourage, support, and educate workers to mitigate that risk.

Where we've arrived on asbestos is that the benefit is just not worth it. We don't need asbestos. It's silly, in our view, to rely on education and safety requirements when you could simply have it removed from the workplace.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Ms. Trotta, did you want to add something very quickly?

Ms. Sara Trotta: No, that's okay. Thanks.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You talked about existing uses. What uses are there, other than brake pads, and I think some firefighting equipment? What other uses are you aware of?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: The other most significant kind, apart from brake pads, unless Sara corrects me, is piping used in largely commercial construction. Asbestos can be used as an insulation on piping.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Is it wrapped around the piping?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes. It's incorporated into a wrapping around the piping.

● (1630)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: And that's still being used today?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: In Canada, those pipes are still being manufactured and installed.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Are there any other uses you can think of? You're talking about banning new uses.

Ms. Sara Trotta: That's right.

Just to pick up a bit on the piping, the asbestos cement pipes that are used in Canada are made of a mix of cement that contains asbestos within it. We know they have up to 12% asbestos, which is quite a high content. That's one of the main uses that we see.

We also know that construction workers installing these drainage pipes are supposed to use a snap-cutting technology that wouldn't create dust. However, in the small, tight spaces where they're being installed, the snap-cutting device doesn't fit, so they're using saws to cut it. That causes the dust to be released, and of course they're therefore being exposed.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Can you comment on regulations compared to other jurisdictions in terms of the use of asbestos? Why do you think it hasn't been banned yet? I realize you're advocating for it, but why hasn't it happened?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Setting aside the variations among countries, the best information we have is that there are 50 countries around the world that have outright bans on the use of asbestos. I'm sure there's some variation in how complete that is, but there's no question that—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Where do we rank?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: We're not in the top 50. I can tell you that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: If you don't know, that's fine.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Sure.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have a question about toxins in general.

In your opinion, are there populations that are more vulnerable than other populations, populations that are more likely to be exposed? In other words, is there a socio-economic dynamic that should be considered when we're reviewing CEPA? Are there certain populations that would be more affected?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I would suspect there's certainly a socio-economic dimension to a lot of these risks, both because people are less likely to have received education in where those risks reside and also because they may be more likely to rely on services that aren't equipped to meet the standards.

For instance, if you're renovating a home, lower-income people are probably less likely to be able to access the professional contractors who are going to go through a proper inspection.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: For the record, what you're saying is just anecdotal.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Sure.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You don't know that to be a fact.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: No.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shields is next.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses here today.

I'm just following a bit along on the asbestos, because we've had conversations about it. Out there in the general public, there's a belief that there's none there, so that's your first challenge. Most people don't think it exists, right? Brake pads are something I used to put on myself, and we all have different ones, so that's part of your problem.

When people see asbestos removal, they see guys in hazmat suits and construction sites are closed in, and it is tight. Having been in the municipal world, that was our worst fear. If we were doing a renovation on a building and found asbestos somewhere, it meant a very expensive removal.

You referred to an inventory. In the world that I've known, you don't know it's there until you poke a hole in the wall. When you talked about doing an inventory, which is a really interesting topic, how would you do that? You've got all these people who may be exposed to it, but how are you going to do an inventory?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Let me start with an answer, and then hopefully we'll get close to a complete one.

There are two existing lists of buildings with asbestos that I'm aware of. The federal government has produced one list of buildings owned by Public Works. It was just released a couple of months ago. There's also one that the Province of Saskatchewan has, which is a registry for all public buildings in Saskatchewan containing asbestos.

I think you have a point about the challenge with regard to knowing where it all is, but I think the first step is having a system in which, when you do know it's there, it is recorded, and people can access that information. One of the problems we have in a lot of the country is that even when asbestos is discovered somewhere, there is no requirement for it to be reported and for the information to be made publicly available to people to check. I think that's the first step. How you then go beyond that and make sure that it's comprehensive, potentially including both public and private buildings, is a different challenge, I think.

Do you have anything else on that?

Ms. Sara Trotta: No. I think the case in Saskatchewan is an interesting one, and their registry has definitely faced some obstacles, but they've gotten to a point now where they have basically mandated that all public buildings have to go through a study to determine whether or not they contain asbestos, and then the reporting mechanism is really quite simple. It reports not only whether or not there's asbestos contained in the building but also where it is in the building and the condition of it, because as you well know, the condition of asbestos does help to determine the risk associated with it. If it's undisturbed and it's completely contained, it's not necessarily dangerous. It's when it becomes disturbed that it's dangerous.

● (1635)

Mr. Martin Shields: One of the things we find with the private sector is that in municipalities, a lot of buildings are left and people can't sell them or they don't want to touch them because they know what's in there, so we're stuck with very hazardous buildings because nobody's willing to pay that cost. We get stuck with those in municipalities all the time, and we don't want to do it. They're not ours, but the private sector is not going to touch them. They've either gone bankrupt or walked away from them because of the extreme costs it takes to deal with them.

Since you are the Canadian Cancer Society, I'm going to move to the area of lifestyle choices.

To me, nicotine is one of the toughest ones out there, and it's a lifestyle choice. Talk a little bit about education. What do you believe people should be hearing, and at what age?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I'll make a few key points.

You're absolutely right that tobacco remains the number one preventable cause of cancer death. Every year in Canada, it's responsible for 20,000 deaths by cancer alone. We are certainly advocating for a comprehensive approach that would include taxation, measures on packaging and sales, and education and cessation programs. I don't know what Sara thinks, but I don't think there's an age that's too young to start educating Canadians about the hazards of tobacco smoke, and also to make sure we're keeping the spaces where children are present completely free of tobacco smoke at all times.

Mr. Martin Shields: I was involved in health governance for a long time, and one of the problems we had was that Health Canada and the Public Health Agency always wanted to deal with high school kids, and we could never convince them that this was the wrong level to start with. If you're not starting with kids in grades 4, 5, and 6, you're lost. As educators, we knew that when there was money coming from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency for health governance and cancer education, they always targeted the wrong age.

If you want to do something to make a difference with that very harmful cancer-causing agent, you're doing it at the wrong level. I say that from my experience both as an educator and as a public health person. It's at the wrong age, and we need to do more with that one, because as you say, that's a big one.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Thank you.

Mr. Martin Shields: All right. Thank you.

I'm from the Athabasca-Peace country, and I appreciate your being here. As an Albertan, I've watched the development of the oil sands, with the history and the innovation. I'm very interested, as things could change and should change.

I think you started describing what your role would look like. We always hear the scientists. You talk about the scientists, but how would you match up? I heard you talking a little bit about how you would fit in with that science. We've talked about science a number of times in relation to different things, and as we've met with indigenous people, we've talked with them about their knowledge. What would the end result look like to you as a working model?

The Chair: Please be very short. I'm sorry to do that, but it was a long question, so we haven't got a lot of time for the answer. Go ahead.

Ms. Melody Lepine: To begin, we believe in the precautionary principle, as an example, so when you don't know, why keep approving? But that's what we see. We're sacrificing a lot of our traditional territory for the benefit of all Canadians with the economic opportunities from the development of the tar sands...oil sands.

I think my colleague spoke about free, prior, informed consent. There have been failures within consultation. I participated in over eight regulatory hearings where we voiced our concerns, and approval after approval neglected to include our traditional knowledge or really incorporate our concerns.

I think there could easily be thresholds identified and protected areas established in terms of how much wildlife needs to be impacted and what the quality of the water is.

I'll give you the example of the Athabasca River when Alberta developed the framework on how much water could be extracted for extracting bitumen. It's very intensive raw water use, and all of that comes from the Athabasca River. They incorporated a threshold only looking at how much water fish and fish habitat need. The federal government was involved with that through the DFO. Nobody asked our community how much water the Mikisew need. They did not say, “You navigate the river and you drink the water. How much do you need?”

Thresholds like those that include our concerns and our indigenous knowledge.... We actually came up with a threshold. We called it our aboriginal base flow, and now we monitor, and we're seeing a decline in an aboriginal base flow that is impacting our navigation and our ability to exercise our treaty rights.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that. Those are good answers.

Go ahead, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thanks, folks, for being here. One of the reasons I like this committee so much is the tremendous amount of perspective we get and the level of expertise from the witnesses who present to us.

We've heard of and we've discussed environmental justice in marginalized communities. We've heard that perhaps there are greater health issues due to substances in marginalized communities. My question would be for Melody or Phil. As an indigenous government organization, is this your experience? I think Melody might have touched on a couple of specific examples of substances that may have been issues, but can you give me some examples of some substances that would certainly be bigger issues for marginalized communities?

Ms. Melody Lepine: I'll let maybe Phil talk about—

Mr. Darren Fisher: I love the Superman T-shirt, Phil.

Mr. Phil Thomas: Sorry for being underdressed. I wasn't sure what to expect today.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I'm going shopping for that shirt. We're overdressed.

Mr. Phil Thomas: They're any contaminant or any toxin that is bioavailable to wildlife and wildlife consumers. For those communities that are remote—and there was some mention that 60% of indigenous communities in Canada are remote communities—their refrigerator's actually in the backwoods. They're drinking the water and eating the wildlife. Any contaminant like methylmercury or some of these PAHs—anything that is soluble in fat—is a great sort of metric of a contaminant that could impact some of these remote communities, because they become amplified up the food web and then they're consumed by the top consumers, who are often community members.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Okay, I'll stick with you, Phil. In your opinion, do you feel that all levels of government—federal, provincial, and indigenous—are working together, that they're playing an active role to reduce the level of these substances in your areas?

Mr. Phil Thomas: I believe that there's a good intention to work together, but I believe that the mechanisms by which things are facilitated to allow for this integration across governments especially is lacking.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Do you want to comment on that, Melody, or are you good?

Ms. Melody Lepine: No, I think that's good. I agree with Phil. The intention is there. I think it just needs to be backed up with adequate funding.

I mentioned that we do our own monitoring within our community. It's completely funded by our community. We have no funding sources from any level of government. There's a lot of talk and there seems to be a lot of will, but we really want to see it backed up with some action.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Gotcha. Thank you.

Madam Chair, if I have a moment or two—

The Chair: Yes, you have time.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I'm going to pass it along to Mr. Amos.

Mr. William Amos: I'm looking to our indigenous witnesses for very simple yes-or-no responses, just so we can have the answer on the record.

Would your organizations support increased investments by the federal government in toxicity assessments, in evaluations of toxic load-bearing by isolated indigenous communities downstream or in proximity of industrial facilities?

The Chair: That was a tough question.

Mr. William Amos: I'm simply trying to make sure we have the answer on the record.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Verna McGregor: Absolutely, but I can see a problem, too, because, coming from a community.... There's an ambivalence as well. Sometimes we say that we are the most studied population here, so there might be some pushback in that regard, but absolutely, because now, with the increase in contaminants, it would add to.... You also have a controlled environment, which would add to the research base.

● (1645)

Ms. Melody Lepine: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

Am I—

The Chair: Yes, you have time. You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. William Amos: We have had witnesses come before us and suggest that CEPA ought to require an alternatives-based approach, meaning that industry should be forced to identify safer alternatives, if one can be used, when there are toxicity issues with products that are currently being used. Would your organizations be supportive of that kind of approach? If you are not in a position to answer today, I would be happy to receive a written answer later on.

Ms. Lynne Groulx: As long as the alternatives proposed are looked at from a gender perspective....

Ms. Melody Lepine: Yes, I would agree. I would also like to maybe follow up with a written response to that question. I think, just from my limited understanding of science, that exploring alternatives is always a good thing. That's if I understand your question correctly.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. William Amos: Okay, go head.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

I'll come back to the Cancer Society. In my riding, we have Queen's University, and they do quite a bit of research that relates to cancer. I'm trying to get a sense of what type of research is happening out there, and I'd be interested to know if, for example, it's predominantly focused on clinical treatment. Do you have any feedback on that?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I can tell you that our research is spread fairly evenly across what we call the three ends of cancer—prevention, care, and quality of life and survivorship. I think it's more in the second area. One of the areas where there has been the greatest increase in research in the last, say, decade is prevention, because of the recognition of what we were speaking about earlier—that there is so much potential to save lives simply by stopping people from developing cancer in the first place.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, that's great.

Next up is Mr. Fast.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): What I want to do is carry on in the same vein and talk about asbestos.

You were asked what kinds of people are presently exposed to asbestos in Canada. You talked about those in the construction industry and those in the auto mechanics industry, and I think you got cut off there. Can you name some other professions where this is still a very serious issue?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I actually have the list right here: manufacturing, construction, transportation and storage, and then a collection of other occupations.

Hon. Ed Fast: There are also many buildings across Canada that still have asbestos in them.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Absolutely. Truthfully—and I think this goes to an earlier point—increasingly that's really where the risk is going to reside. There is no question that there has been a reduction in the active use of products containing asbestos. We feel that it's time to put a period at the end of that and say, “No more”, but the elephant in the room is all of the asbestos that is still out there in buildings. In many cases, we don't know it's there. In the event of a fire or an improperly regulated renovation, people can be exposed to dangerous levels.

Hon. Ed Fast: Have you seen the bill on asbestos that was just tabled? You may have even had a hand in crafting it. I don't know.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: It's yes to number one, no to number two.

Hon. Ed Fast: You may be back someday at either this committee or probably the health committee.

Carry on. It may not be your responsibility as the Canadian Cancer Society, but has there been any work done anywhere to determine what the scope of the remaining asbestos risks in Canada is and the related costs of addressing those risks? All buildings in Canada are eventually going to either be demolished or have the asbestos removed from them. What is the scope of that problem?

● (1650)

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I don't think I can give you a specific answer.

The way you framed it is interesting. The big project being worked on right now on the economic burden of occupational cancers looks at the associated costs, but it deals only with the costs of cancers from past exposure, and then of course there's the challenge of dealing with the active exposure from continued use of the product now.

One of the things some groups have called for—and I think it's definitely worth considering—is that as part of any plan to, first, ban the use of asbestos, and second, start getting a handle on how much asbestos is out there, there needs to be some kind of advisory group put together to develop an approach to measuring just how big a problem this is. There are actions we can take right now, but there's also a lot of information that still has to be gathered.

I think we're going to find that even though there will be costs, it will be worth it, because the fatality rate of cancers caused by asbestos is very high, as is the treatment cost. Managing this in a responsible way will pay off down the road.

Hon. Ed Fast: We've had a fair bit of discussion at committee already within the context of the study on the use of alternatives for known toxic substances. I'm assuming that asbestos does have alternatives, even within industrial settings, and that those are being used elsewhere around the world.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: You're correct.

We've looked particularly into the two most common uses now, brake pads and pipes, and there are absolutely alternatives. Most of those products do not contain asbestos; there are only some that do.

Hon. Ed Fast: My colleague asked a question about smoking, and you mentioned that smoking was the number one cause of preventable cancer. Would that apply to the smoking of marijuana as well?

It's an honest question.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I know.

Hon. Ed Fast: It's not about the merits of marijuana itself, but rather the health impacts of using marijuana, especially in smoke form.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I don't know if you're going to buy what I'm going to tell you right now, but I'll tell you what I've found out, which is that there's no question.... Smoking anything exposes you to carcinogens. The evidence of a relationship between marijuana use and cancer is pretty weak so far, and it's not entirely clear why that is. One plausible explanation is that people tend not to smoke it in anywhere near the volume that they smoke tobacco—depending on the person in question—so the likelihood of its leading to cancer seems to be much lower.

We also have to remind ourselves that research in this area probably hasn't been as extensive as it might have been, because it was an illegal substance. It's something we have to keep a really close eye on, but it certainly isn't a carcinogen that is among our top concerns.

Hon. Ed Fast: This question is to Melody.

In terms of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, in your recommendations you're suggesting these schedules and lists in the act be updated to reflect the additional PAHs of concern. Have you met with any resistance in doing that, and if so, who has resisted it, and what were the reasons for that resistance?

Ms. Melody Lepine: Personally, I'm not aware of any resistance to this idea.

I know that when we have asked for an increase in parameters in monitoring, in terms of toxicity and contaminants reaching our community, there has sometimes been some resistance from industry. They don't see that they're impacting us downstream. They may question an increase, in having more contaminants to monitor. That could be a potential source of resistance, but I don't see why.

When it comes to human health and our reliance on a healthy environment, I think monitoring.... Adding to the list of contaminants is important not only for my community, but also for all Canadians.

The Chair: Melody, thank you very much.

You're way past time. I'm being very generous here.

Mr. Bossio is next.

● (1655)

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Melody and Phil, I heard you talking about the precautionary principle, and I'd like to delve a bit into that.

As you know, under CEPA most of the assessments are risk-based assessments rather than threat-based assessments, which take into account more of the precautionary principle and the bioaccumulative aspect of toxic chemicals.

I'd like your thoughts around that and how that might serve you in moving forward with studies around the bioaccumulative effects on your indigenous community in particular.

Ms. Melody Lepine: Actually, Phil has done some of this research. Maybe I'll get him to speak. He just explained to me some of the lab work he has done and how it really needs to apply out in the field.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Great. Thank you.

Mr. Phil Thomas: Thank you.

Essentially, the precautionary principle just needs to move beyond the traditional list of substances, simply for one reason, talking about those PAHs.

We've often modelled the bioaccumulation of these compounds based on the 16 U.S. EPA priority substances already on the list. They are not bioaccumulative, and they're readily metabolized. However, we're finding that those alkylated forms of those PAHs do bioaccumulate. If you proceed based on an old list, we see they don't bioaccumulate, so it's not an issue, but if we just expand the list and look beyond those pure parent compounds, we'd see that in fact they do bioaccumulate.

Mr. Mike Bossio: You feel that instead of using a risk-based approach, using a threat-based approach would better capture that aspect you were just addressing.

Mr. Phil Thomas: Definitely.

Mr. Mike Bossio: As far as your ability to regulate eliminating these chemicals from the environment is concerned, if you could have them labelled as toxic and therefore have the whole virtual elimination aspect under the act, do you feel that if we incorporated environmental justice into CEPA it would give you an opportunity to address issues like that, issues that aren't being covered today?

Mr. Phil Thomas: I believe it would, yes.

Mr. Mike Bossio: If we found ways to incorporate environmental justice.... I would throw the same question to Gabriel as well. We're dealing with these issues around risk-based versus threat-based versus virtual elimination. If we want to have government move on these things, as far as the elimination of asbestos within our environment is concerned, would you also agree that we need to move towards environmental justice and towards establishing more of a threat-based model for CEPA, rather than the risk-based model that exists today?

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes, I think so. I'm not sure the language is exactly the same as what I'd use, but I think that the underlying point you're trying to make is one we would agree with for sure.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Sorry; I meant hazard-based, not threat-based. I apologize. I got that wrong. Sorry. I got my terminology wrong. I've been away from it too long.

That answers a lot of what I was trying to get at, and I'll turn the rest of my time to Will, because I know he had a number of areas he wanted to cover.

Mr. William Amos: Great.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. William Amos: This is when the cameras are rolling and you're—

The Chair: Okay, it's two minutes and it's running out.

Mr. William Amos: Yes. Why I don't pass to a colleague?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I would like to ask the same question of our indigenous representatives here.

On the hazard-based approach versus a risk-based approach when dealing with labelling substances, can you comment as to what method you prefer and why?

Ms. Verna McGregor: I can't comment. We don't have an answer.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: In the hazard-based approach, you determine the substance and the hazardous nature that it has. The risk-based approach is coming from the angle of the risk that it poses on the community from a risk perspective. Sometimes you can mitigate through risk assessment.

Does that help or no?

● (1700)

Ms. Lynne Groulx: It does help, but I think I'm still not going to answer that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay. I think the clock has probably run down by now.

The Chair: We're close, but we still have time if you have another question. Otherwise we could move over to Mr. Choquette, and I actually have some questions—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

The Chair: —for a change, now that we have time.

Go ahead, Mr. Choquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

My first question is for the members of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Earlier, you talked about the greater vulnerability of aboriginal women when it comes to climate change. I want to hear about this issue. In concrete terms, what takes place?

[*English*]

Ms. Verna McGregor: In terms of vulnerability, it goes back to native women being in rural and remote locations, but a lot of our women are in urban areas as well. For example, there were the recent fires in Fort McMurray.

Again, the socio-economic situation of aboriginal women is that they are the lowest in Canada in terms of income. In addition, they have a tendency to have more dependants, so when they're in a climate change emergency, they're very stretched in terms of resources. As well, for example, in our communities we have a severe housing shortage, and climate change exacerbates the whole issue of mould, let alone fire mitigation. Also, when you're spread out in terms of access to resources in a rural or remote area, it's quite the challenge.

As for how women become vulnerable, you become a climate refugee, which is similar to what we've recently experienced here, and then there's the migration to urban centres and trying to access additional resources. As well, they tend to have a higher proportion of female single-parent households, and as we all know, children cost money. It's not just about aboriginal women. It's about Canadian women.

We also need mitigation strategies and emergency planning, because it's different when you have children and you have limited resources. I think that's the biggest vulnerability in terms of climate change, but there are also the environmental impacts of, for example, the resource industries.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

I want to ask the representatives of the Mikisew Cree first nation a question about the addition of polycyclic aromatic compounds to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999.

Why is it so important to add chemical products in the capacity of hazardous substances that literally ruin your health?

Mr. Phil Thomas: Thank you for the question.

The main reason why these compounds should be included on the list of priority substances is that the compounds are very bioaccumulative in the waterfowl and animals consumed by the first nations. Once the body absorbs and metabolizes the compounds, they transform into mitogenic compounds that cause cancer. It's simply to promote good health and ensure the traditions of the first nations are protected so that they can continue to hunt, trap and fish.

● (1705)

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Thomas, I asked you a question earlier. Each time a study is published that indicates an increase in cancer cases in aboriginal populations, a few months or years later, other studies show that the entire thing was false and fabricated. I sometimes wonder why there is such a denigration of the work done to protect people's health.

How do you explain this?

Mr. Phil Thomas: First, I want to specify that I'm a wildlife biologist and not an expert in human health.

Welcome to the world of science, where a study conducted by an individual or group contradicts another study. It's the nature of science. It's the case everywhere, whether we're dealing with oil sands or cancer cases in Fort Chipewyan.

Mr. François Choquette: I want to talk briefly about mercury. We have worked a lot on the mercury issue. Our colleague Mr. Fisher from the Liberal Party tabled a bill to remove a great deal of mercury from circulation and to do so more effectively.

What are we currently doing about the other sources of mercury, such as those in the Alberta region?

Mr. Phil Thomas: The two main forms of mercury are inorganic mercury, to which animals in the environment don't have access, and organic mercury, which is methylated. The mercury accumulates in organisms and causes neurotoxic effects, especially in women and small children.

The mercury cycle is therefore complex. There's still much work to be done. In particular, we need to understand what can methylate inorganic mercury in its main form, which can be dangerous.

Mr. François Choquette: Apart from studies, have concrete measures been taken?

Mr. Phil Thomas: None are currently being taken.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, I gave you almost an extra four minutes there, in addition to the three minutes, so we're just going to add four minutes onto everybody.

Mr. Eglinski, you have four minutes.

I understand you will be splitting the time with Mr. Shields.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: He's going to take the first part of the question.

The Chair: We have an excellent panel and we've had some great questions, so I just thought we wouldn't waste the time if we have it.

Go ahead, Mr. Shields.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to go back to asbestos. I think you identified—and I want to make sure of this—eliminating brake pads in the country, terminating international trading of products with asbestos, and no longer using the pipes that contain it as our first steps. Those were the items you identified.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes.

Mr. Martin Shields: How do you get rid of brake pads containing asbestos in this country? How would you deal with that? There are a lot of old cars out there.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Do you mean that already exist—

Mr. Martin Shields: Yes.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: —and are already on cars?

Mr. Martin Shields: Yes.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: There is definitely going to be a period when those products can no longer be legally bought, traded, exported, imported, or used. They'll be completely phased out of the system. There will be some that are already either on cars or you'll have inventory that an auto body shop will have or something like that.

In response to what was said earlier, it means stepping up the efforts to make sure that people have the information on how to safely handle those materials and to make sure that the regulations on a safe exposure level are very clear. This also speaks to the point that Mr. Fast raised about there being some bigger questions here about how we move into a post-asbestos world. We have a bit more work to do on that.

Mr. Martin Shields: Good. That was what I was asking, but you have more work to do to get there.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes.

Mr. Martin Shields: You're identifying the issues, but you haven't figured out how to do it yet.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes—not all of it, for sure.

Mr. Martin Shields: If you have anything that you would like to submit to us on how we could do that, that's what we would be looking for.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: That's great. Thank you.

The Chair: You have time.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Phil, you talked about the PAH levels in the Athabasca River and the Peace-Athabasca Delta and the monitoring you are doing. Are you doing monitoring around the country in a lot of different areas, and are PAH numbers drastically higher than in other areas that may have some industrial development in them?

Mr. Phil Thomas: Certainly we've been looking at the impacts of PAHs, not only in northern Alberta but also in the Slave River delta and the Northwest Territories, up the Mackenzie River to the Mackenzie River delta and the Mackenzie communities, so we are looking. Also, I have done a lot of work in Hamilton Harbour on the double-crested cormorants. With the coal in the water there, there are some issues.

How does it compare? We find that PAHs follow often latitudinal gradients similar to mercury, so because it binds to particulate matter coming out of smokestacks, there's a capacity for long-range transport that gets deposited mostly on those northern communities.

Over the last 25 years, PAHs dominate the sum of all contaminants found in Arctic biota. We're finding that in animals and plants in the Arctic, PAHs make up the majority of those compounds found in those wildlife species.

● (1710)

Mr. Jim Eglinski: It's good to hear that you're monitoring right across the country.

That's good, thank you.

The Chair: You have one minute, if you need it.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: One minute....

The Chair: You don't have to take it.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: I'll pass it on. We have a good panel here, and maybe there will be questions asked.

The Chair: Are you guys all—

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Madam Chair, it's yours.

As the chair, I don't normally get to ask questions, so it is really nice to have an opportunity.

When I was listening—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's time.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All right, stop that.

When I was listening to the testimony about trying to put a timeline for the end of asbestos use and how it was going to take quite some time to deal with what's already out there, I was thinking of urea formaldehyde. If somebody found it in their house, before they could sell the house, they had to identify it and it would be illegal if you sold your home without identifying it. I don't exactly know what the penalties were, but people generally understood that was going to be a marker on the home and it stayed on the home.

Is that something that you're considering or you're proposing? I'm trying to figure it out. This is a big challenge.

Ms. Sara Trotta: I absolutely think that's something the Cancer Society would give consideration to as a possible policy to address this issue.

As we look towards creating this final ban on asbestos, I think we really need to look at moving the legislation that pertains to it from a controlled use approach to an outright ban. While we know that there are CAR regulations in place, those regulations don't always have the teeth to really hold in the way that we need them to.

We know that with asbestos there is no safe exposure limit, so we need to start looking at some of those policy pieces, such as what you're referring to with urea formaldehyde, to see how we can use them in a very similar fashion to address some of these issues around the registry aspect of, for example, privately owned buildings and homes.

The Chair: I was just sitting here trying to think about how we would do that and what mechanisms we might have to do it. I was thinking that we have done something like that before, right? That's the first one that popped to mind. There may be others. I was just curious. If you do have some of those suggestions, we'd love to hear them.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Yes.

The Chair: It looks like Mark wants to get right in on my questioning, so go right ahead.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I want a follow-up to that. The formaldehyde product was quite different. It had a half-life. As it decomposed, it turned into a gas, and actually entered.... There was a real hazard to it—

Mr. Gabriel Miller: That's right.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: —whereas asbestos is only hazardous when it's disturbed, especially when it's used in insulation. From a risk-based approach, when dealing with asbestos, quite often the answer is “don't touch it”.

Do you at least acknowledge that what I'm saying is the case? Do you agree with me?

Ms. Sara Trotta: Yes, I think we want to move beyond that risk-based approach to a more hazard-based approach. We know that there's no safe exposure and we know that over time it does start to break down just through the wear and tear in a building and that people will eventually be exposed, so we need to address that issue of exposure.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Yes. I guess what I'm getting at is whether the approach should be exactly the same, given that the substance is significantly different. As a matter of fact, urea formaldehyde no longer poses a risk, because it's beyond the half-life of the substance. It's not a threat anymore. It's not even required to be.... Well, it might still be required, but the last time it was used was in 1988, so long ago that the gas is all released and it's no longer a threat. That's at least my understanding of it.

I'm concerned about going down the road of using the same approach to two fundamentally different substances.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: I have to admit that I'm not terribly familiar with the other example. I think part of what you touched on, though, or what I heard, is that we shouldn't be rushing to the conclusion that there should be a national project to go out and get this out of everywhere it exists.

● (1715)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Right.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: That's absolutely true—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's what I was getting at.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: —but we do need to know where it is.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay.

Mr. Gabriel Miller: Also, we need to monitor it, because some of it will be a hazard, and all of it will be a hazard if it's disrupted or handled in the wrong way.

The Chair: Just to be clear, I wasn't intending it to be deemed to be exactly similar. I was looking at mechanisms to be able to identify it or to tell people that if they find it in their home, they don't necessarily have to extract it, but they need to let the next person who's buying their home know so that they're not cutting into the wall or the tiles and exposing themselves. I wasn't exactly aiming for identical. I was just looking at mechanisms.

I have one more question, and then I'm out of time.

Lynne, you mentioned that you would have the ability to look at CEPA or would be interested in looking at CEPA with a first nations lens, and I'm very interested to see that. It's very hard for us to apply a first nations lens in looking at what we might need to do to CEPA, and it would be very helpful to have a first nations group do that. I'm wondering if you can share with me a bit more about what would be involved in doing that and what it would take.

Ms. Lynne Groulx: What we do, basically, is take the piece of legislation, go through it clause by clause, and look at the perspective. Is it taking into account first nations indigenous legal traditions or customary laws? If yes, we wouldn't make a comment, and if no, we would provide some commentary and advice.

I'm also referring to gender-based analysis, which is more commonly known within the government. I believe Justice does a gender-based analysis, or is supposed to, because there is a policy.

We use the two lenses. We use the gender lens and the indigenous lens. That's the way we would do it.

The Chair: I guess what I'm looking for.... You don't have to tell me the answer today, but maybe you can let us know what it would take—

Ms. Lynne Groulx: Okay.

The Chair: —and what you would need to be able to do that. I think that would be helpful.

Ms. Lynne Groulx: Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Go ahead, Mr. Eglinski, and then we really do have to call the time.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: You know, I'm going to hold off, because I think it's something for us to have a discussion about later when we go through this. I won't want to bring it up here right now.

The Chair: Sure.

I want to thank all the guests very much for the wisdom that you've shared with us, and the good discussion and answers. It's been an excellent panel today.

We're going to move into a closed session, so I'm going to end the meeting very quickly. We're going to have to clear the room so that we can do a bit of business, if you don't mind.

I'm sorry to do that to you. Thanks so much.

We'll suspend for just a few minutes. Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]