

Dangerous health and safety risks posed by natural gas wells prompt call for official inquiry under BC's *Public Health Act*

VICTORIA, BC - A growing number of residents in northeast British Columbia say they are so concerned about the health risks associated with the region's natural gas industry and an expanding network of toxic sour gas wells, that they want provincial Health Minister Colin Hansen to appoint a formal inquiry under *Public Health Act*.

In a letter sent today, BC health minister Colin Hansen is asked to appoint a formal inquiry. The request is prompted in part by a dangerous leak at an Encana well near Pouce Coupe in November 2009 that resulted in 30,000 cubic metres of gas with hydrogen sulphide content more than six times over lethal levels spewing into the air for nearly 8 hours before local residents received evacuation orders.

In the letter, lawyers representing members of the Peace Environment and Safety Trustees Society (PESTS), say the inquiry should address several issues including whether wells are set far enough away from homes; emergency plans; air quality monitoring; and the adequacy of notifications in the event of leaks.

The formal request has already received several expressions of support including from the Peace River Regional District, Northern Health Authority, and Treaty 8 Tribal Association.

"Toxic sour gas was a military weapon in World War 1. But unlike soldiers in wartime, residents living near sour gas wells may have no warning that they face potentially lethal gas exposures," says Calvin Sandborn, a lawyer with the University of Victoria's Environmental Law Centre. "Sour gas regulation in BC is lax. Enforcement effort is feeble. That's why our clients want a public inquiry."

"A major concern with today's lax approach is that the provincial energy regulator – the Oil and Gas Commission (OGC) – can exempt energy companies from key protections such as leak detection systems. And it can do so without notifying residents," adds environmental lawyer, Tim Thielmann.

A detailed brief to Hansen – assisted in part by West Coast Environmental Law Association - notes that in three decades sour gas leaks have led to 34 worker deaths in Alberta and B.C.; deaths of cattle; and complaints of headaches, eye irritation, nosebleeds, miscarriages and flu-like symptoms in residential populations living near gas well sites. Yet regional health care officials, who have raised concerns about the health threats posed by the industry, have had virtually no opportunity to shape industry regulations.

"Our regional health authority has repeatedly been rebuffed in its efforts to get standards in place that adequately protect the public from the threats posed by natural gas industry activities. We believe that local health officials must be at the table where the regulations guiding the industry are set in such a way that our health and safety is ensured. And we believe they should be funded in that work by a portion of the hundreds of millions of dollars that the provincial government collects annually in bonus bids and royalty fees from the natural gas industry," says Lois Hill, a PESTS representative.

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- For a full copy of the letter and brief to Hansen go to www.bcpest.ca

