

Peace River Families Fed Up With Baytex Energy Oil Fumes

CP | By Bob Weber, **The Canadian Press** Posted: 12/23/2013 12:48 pm EST | Updated: 12/23/2013 4:20 pm EST



EDMONTON - An Alberta family that says it was forced to leave its home due to intolerable smells from a nearby heavy oil producer has turned to the courts to try to get the sickening odours to stop.

"It's necessary to try and bring the venting of these emissions to an end as quickly as possible," said Alain Labrecque, who is asking a Peace River court for an eight-month injunction to shut down 46 wells owned by Calgary-based Baytex Energy (TSX:BTE).

A Baytex spokesman said Monday that tests last spring showed no exceedances of provincial air-quality guidelines. Andrew Loosley said the company is continuing to co-operate with an inquiry called by Alberta's energy minister.

"We are in compliance with all applicable regulations," Loosley said.

In an affidavit filed with the injunction request, Labrecque writes that he, his wife and two children are accustomed to living alongside the energy industry and for years had no problems with the wells in the Reno field near their farm in northwestern Alberta. He says odours began in 2011 after Baytex bought the wells, which use an unusual method of heating bitumen in above-ground tanks to extract the oil.

"By March 2011, the odours and noxious fumes continued to get worse," Labrecque writes. "Karla and I continued to experience severe headaches and other health impacts.

"The dizziness and loss of balance continued, but other impacts started, including sinus congestion, muscle spasms, popping ears, memory loss, numbness in the hands and side of the nose, constipation/diarrhea, vomiting, eye twitching, fatigue and other impacts. A number of these symptoms began to show up in our kids as well and we became even more concerned."

Baytex's operations have also been a concern in the nearby community of Three Creeks, where several families citing similar health complaints have also left their farms.

Baytex is the only operator in the Reno field.

Hearings that are part of the inquiry are scheduled to begin Jan. 21. A report is due by the end of March. But no matter what the hearing concludes, its recommendations are likely to take months to implement.

"It could be into the summer of 2014, or into the fall or later, before these families get any opportunity to get some relief," said Keith Wilson, the lawyer for the Labrecques. "That's just too long."

Documents submitted along with the injunction request suggest that the bitumen produced in the area is higher than normal in sulphur, which is a common source of bad smells.

"The possibility that the high sulphur content of the bitumen produced in the Three Creeks and Reno areas might have something to do with the complaints of odours is reinforced by an analysis of the odours and the description of the odours," said a Dec. 13 report produced for the Alberta Energy Regulator.

Another report for the regulator casts doubt on Baytex's air-quality measurement. It notes there was some question as to whether the company scaled back its operations during the time the measurements were being taken. That report also concludes that previous environmental studies "were of too poor quality to be useful."

Government figures show the amount of gas vented from a large area that includes Peace River has roughly doubled since 2010.

Residents suggest Baytex's problems result from the company's attempts to increase production and heat its bitumen to higher temperatures in unsealed tanks.

Loosley said the company is installing a pipeline to carry away some of the gases that could be causing the smells.

"We've had lots of dialogue with the residents over the last number of years," he said. "We've been trying to do some improvements to those facilities on an ongoing basis."

The Labrecques are living in Smithers, B.C. — a whole province over from where his grandfather pioneered and where their house now stands abandoned.

"It sucks, for sure," Labrecque said of their situation at a time of year when thoughts turn to family and home.

"It does remind us of what our place was and where we should be, meeting with family and friends. It's definitely been tough."

A hearing on the injunction request is expected Jan. 15.

An infrared video showing the emissions can be viewed here: <http://www.stopbaytex.ca/video-of-baytex-energy-emissions/>