

Sarnia's toxic legacy

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Sarnia, Ontario, is a small, welcoming city on the south shore of Lake Huron's famously blue waters. Belying its waterfront parkland and a municipal website that describes it as "vibrant and healthy," however, this southwestern Ontario city is also the heart of Canada's Chemical Valley. Within 25 kilometres of downtown and the adjacent Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve, there are 62 large industrial facilities, constituting some 40 percent of Canada's chemical industry.

Today, EcoJustice (formerly Sierra Legal) released "Canada's Chemical Valley Exposed," an investigative report that is a dramatic indictment of the industry's impact on regional citizens. The report assesses different types of air pollution: air contaminants that are linked with acid rain, smog and respiratory and cardiovascular disease and early death; toxic pollutants associated with environmental contamination, cancer and human developmental disorders; and greenhouse gases. In a groundbreaking approach, "Canada's Chemical Valley Exposed" is the first environmental report to synthesize data from three key government sources: Canada's National Pollutant Release Inventory and the U.S. Toxic Release Inventory, each of which compel industrial facilities on both sides of the border to document emissions, and Canada's greenhouse-gas reporting program.

Most striking to EcoJustice's senior scientist and report author Dr. Elaine MacDonald is the sheer quantity of toxic chemicals that these industries emit into the atmosphere. "In 2005, these facilities released more dangerous chemicals — substances associated with cancer and respiratory and reproductive disorders — than the industrial releases from the entire provinces of Manitoba, New Brunswick or Saskatchewan," says MacDonald. The scientist also notes that three of Ontario's top 10 air polluters do business in Sarnia and that the area's industries produced more than one fifth of the province's total industrial greenhouse-gas emissions in 2005.

Jim Brophy, executive director of the Sarnia branch of the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) and recipient of the Canadian Environment Awards 2003 Silver Award in Environmental Health, has a long history of witnessing the devastating effects industrial contaminants have had on the people in the region. "These emissions are posing a serious threat to human health," he says. "Area residents are suffering a host of health problems associated with exposure to these toxic chemicals."

Pursuing pollution prevention efforts, enforcing existing laws and putting tougher regulatory standards in place are all sighted in the report as strategies for reducing emissions. It's an approach that will demand the vigorous support of industry and the will of all levels of government.

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