

OTTAWA MISSING IN ACTION ON OILSANDS, MUST TAKE BIGGER ROLE: NDP REPORT¹

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The New Democrats say the federal government has abandoned its responsibility to regulate Alberta's oilsands and they want Ottawa to reassert itself to protect the area's air and water. NDP environment critic Linda Duncan on Friday released the party's own report from a House of Commons environment committee that began looking at the impact of the oilsands on fresh water over two years ago. The committee's final report was shelved because members from all the parties couldn't agree on what it should say, but the NDP forged ahead with its own report. The Liberals issued theirs in mid-August.

The NDP paper calls for tougher federal environmental assessments for the oilsands, including the industry's cumulative effects on water. It also says Ottawa shouldn't green-light any more oilsands projects until environmental assessments do a better job of outlining those impacts. "Legal experts concurred that despite broad federal powers ... there has been an abject failure by the federal government to take action in the oilsands," the report says. Duncan said there are all kinds of things Ottawa could — and should — be doing. "The federal government has all kinds of laws. There are all kinds of contaminants that they haven't even regulated yet," she said at a news conference in her Edmonton constituency office. "They could start there. They could step up monitoring."

She suggested the government needs to follow its own legislation during the approval process for proposed oilsands projects. "The federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans could be imposing binding requirements into the approvals where there is impact to the habitat or to the fishery. "We're not talking (about) something extraordinary. We're not even talking (about) new legislation. We're just saying, 'Step up to the plate and assert the powers. If you're not going to use these laws, you may as well get rid of them.'"

The report says Ottawa has a responsibility to step in because the oilsands operations affect aboriginal bands, federal lands, fisheries, migratory birds and species at risk. The environmental impacts also spill over into the neighbouring jurisdictions of Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. Another recommendation is for Environment Canada to dispatch inspectors to Fort McMurray, Alta., the heart of the oilsands industry, to keep on top of any environmental violations. The report released by Liberal members of the committee came to similar conclusions.

Several independent studies over the last months have all suggested that increasing levels of toxic metals and hydrocarbons in the soil and water of the oilsands region are linked to industry. The Alberta government has long suggested that any contamination occurs naturally as oilsands deposits are eroded by rivers and streams. The province announced Friday that it will appoint a panel of scientists to determine if the oilsands are a factor.

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Federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice has also said he's interested in getting to the bottom of the industry's total environmental impact. He told CBC News on Friday that the government is working towards being the cleanest provider of energy on the globe. "I believe we have to be vigilant. I believe we need to be on top of our game as a country," Prentice said. "Our standard has to be that we want to be the most environmentally responsible producer of energy in the world."

Simon Dyer of the Pembina Institute, an environmental think-tank, said it's important that elected representatives from all parties respond to the "evidence of damage" to the region.