

Gogama crude oil spill worries nearby Mattagami First Nation

Cleanup continues at the site of a CN train derailment northwest of Gogama, Ont.

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Mattagami First Nation is sounding the alarm about a CN rail spill near the community.

The First Nation said Saturday's derailment involving 29 crude oil tankers occurred on its traditional territory, located 40 kilometres north of the community.

Ontario's Regional Chief Stan Beardy is advocating for the community to make sure the site is cleaned, as he's concerned about the spill causing environmental damage.

"It is their traditional territory. It's their homeland," he said.

"They still depend on that for their way of life. They still depend on the animals, the birds and the fish from that area. I'm very concerned that, if there's contamination to the natural environment, that it will affect the quality of the animals, birds and fish."

CN and other agencies have been on the scene cleaning up all week. They say the spill is contained, and the rail line is now open to other train traffic.

Information delayed?

The First Nation also wants to know why it wasn't contacted as soon as the train derailed nearby last Saturday.

Coun. Jennifer Constant said she had no idea there was a derailment near her community until she read about it on Facebook.

"We had to initiate contact to get any kind of information, which is a real concern to us considering we were the closest to the incident."

Constant said she got a call from CN on Tuesday — two days later.

CN Public Affairs spokesperson Patrick Waldron said "repeated attempts were made to connect with the chief [and] CN has spoken with at least one councillor."

"CN's outreach to the Mattagami First Nation started Sunday morning and has been ongoing," he added.

But for Mattagami First Nation Chief Walter Naveau, the delay is unacceptable.

"It's big concern from the First Nations because of the environmental impacts of what could happen."

He said he plans to speak with the national chief about oil spill concerns.

"It's big concern from the First Nations because of the environmental impacts of what could happen, the physical damage to the animals and plants. What are the chemicals that are poisonous in there [the crude oil]? We don't know," he said.

"I can only imagine if it would've went through Gogama or something of that nature, it would've been a major catastrophe to our neighbours down the road."

Clean water concerns

Beardy agreed.

"It's only fair that the First Nation is notified to the full extent of what is happening, what is being undertaken to address the accident. There should be strong communication between the railway company and the First Nation," he said.

"Whoever's responsible has to clean up because the people of Mattagami depend for their livelihood to pursue their traditional activities with that area," he said.

Clean water is an issue, Beardy added, "because there's trout in those creeks. They trap in that area, as well hunt animals and birds. I think whoever is responsible for the accident has the responsibility, a legal responsibility, to make sure that it's cleaned up as best as possible."

For its part, the rail company reports it has a communications protocol with the First Nation in place.

"CN has communicated directly with the band council about the incident and has a communications process in place with the band to keep leaders updated on the derailment cleanup," Waldron said.

Health Canada weighs in

Meanwhile, Health Canada says it's closely monitoring updates on the situation from Ontario's Ministry of the Environment.

A Health Canada spokesperson told CBC News the community of Mattagami First Nation did contact Health Canada's Environmental Health Officer regarding the spill.

Mattagami First Nation was advised that current information indicates no risk to the community's water, and that the derailment occurred 40 kilometres from the community, with no entry point into its lake, Health Canada added.