

MOTION – GREAT SLAVE – MARCH 11, 2009

**LOW CARBON FUEL STANDARDS FOR THE GNWT**

Thank you Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of this motion.

In discussing this motion with colleagues and members of the public, it has become quite clear that there is some confusion about what we are proposing by way of this motion. To be clear, this is **not** a motion to implement a carbon tax on fuel purchase in the Northwest Territories. It is also **not** a motion that will result in a different grade or quality of fuel being utilized in the Northwest Territories.

**What this motion is**, is an encouragement for the Government and residents of the Northwest Territories to purchase fuel (gasoline, automotive diesel, home heating fuel, etcetera) from sources where production of the fuel is less threatening to our continued existence.

For the past 5 years, there has been much talk in the NWT about water quality and water quantity. There are few issues that people are more concerned about. In September 2006, there was the Keeper of the Waters Conference in Liidlii Kue (Fort Simpson) which declared that, “Water is a sacred gift, an essential element that sustains and connects life.” In 2007, the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly unanimously passed a resolution declaring that, “water is essential to life, and constitutes a fundamental human right.” In 2007, the Akaitcho Territory held their Water is Life Conference. Last October, I had the privilege of watching the premiere of a compelling and powerful video: *Tu Beta Ts'ena :Water is Life*,

based on the conference. Last November, the Dene Nation also had a water conference. This conference passed a resolution calling for an Indigenous People's Commission on Water.

In 2008, the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources released a discussion paper on developing an NWT Water Strategy. This water strategy was a joint effort of the GNWT and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The Minister and Cabinet should be commended for this good piece of work.

Despite all this interest, all this concern and hard work, our water, both in terms of quality and quantity, is still under threat. We as legislators, we as leaders must do more. While critically important, strategies, meetings, and commissions alone will not get us the changes we need to protect our water.

The biggest single threat to water quality in the NWT, in my opinion, is the Alberta tar sands. A close second is the impact of climate change.

In January, I attended a slide show by Andrew Nikiforuk on the tar sands. The size and scope of the tar sands is truly breathtaking. The tar sands is one of the largest, if not the largest, energy developments in the world. At its full potential, the tar sands would cover an area the size of Florida. I have no doubt that, if Alberta and the federal government get their way, they will mine the tar sands to every last drop. If they do that, the way they have been doing it so far, the NWT and the people of Northern Alberta are in big trouble, to say nothing of the environment. I would encourage all members of this Assembly to check out the latest addition of National Geographic, which begins to show the true size and scale of this project.

What people often don't realize --- and what the oil companies and the Alberta government don't want you to think about -- **is that the tar sands are utterly dependent on the Athabasca River. No Athabasca River, no tar sands.**

The tar sands use enormous amounts of water to produce oil. The tar sands use the same amount of water as a city of two million people. The production of each barrel of tar sands oil requires three barrels of water from the Athabasca River. In theory, most of that water is never supposed to return to the river because once it has been used to help process the raw bitumen it is far too toxic to return to the environment. This water is instead stored in giant tailings ponds that now cover 130 square kilometers.

The oldest tailings pond, the Tar Island Dyke, is right beside the river itself. We know that these tailings ponds leak. There is no question. This was well documented recently by environmental groups. Despite this the Alberta government claims that the pollutants such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and heavy metals found in the water are natural. This position defies good science and common sense.

The fact of the matter is that the Alberta government has historically never wanted to do the science – the comprehensive baseline studies -- that would have established the cold hard, truth. They didn't want to risk it proving that they were wrong. The nightmare scenario is that one of these dykes will breach and thousands of cubic meters of polluted water would spill into the Athabasca, and eventually flow to the Slave River and the rest of the Mackenzie River Basin, our home.

A second major concern, Mr. Speaker, is the impact of climate change on water quantity. The Athabasca river is fed by the Athabasca glacier. The melting of this glacier and the doubling, tripling, and quadrupling of tar sands production will put downward pressure on water quantity. Climate change may cause the BC government to retain more water for its dams along the Peace River. Note, the Peace River provides roughly 75% of the water in the Slave River while the Athabasca provides roughly 25%. Alberta always points this out, along with the fact that their total withdrawals from the Athabasca are around 2-3% of the total flow.

Last but not least, the tar sands are Canada's fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions. Compared to a barrel of conventional oil, 3 times as many greenhouse gasses are emitted in the production of one barrel of tar sands oil. If we as a country, want others to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to help slow down climate change, we better be prepared to reduce our own emissions.

Neither the Alberta government nor the federal government have been prepared to tackle the greenhouse gas emissions stemming from the tar sands. Do not be fooled by the Alberta government's efforts toward carbon sequestration. While the billions that they promise for carbon sequestration sounds impressive, there's little evidence that it will be cost effective or even work for the huge volume of greenhouse gases coming out of the tar sands.

The Premier of Alberta has stated that he does not want to "touch" the brakes or slow down when it comes to the tars sands. Despite recent announcements from the Alberta government on such matters as land reclamation, limiting water

use, storing greenhouse gases, environmental groups such as the Pembina Institute have determined no dramatic change in policies. The Alberta government mistakenly believes that it has a communication problem and not an environmental problem.

I think that as this Assembly, we know that Alberta has an environmental problem and that their environmental problem is our environmental problem. If you believe for a minute that somehow our water is not being affected, or that the people of Fort Chipewyan are not really dying from cancer induced by the tars sands, then what about the future? **If the tars sands remained unchecked, it will be a growing risk to our water, the land, people, and animals of both Northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories.** The sooner that we and our friends and allies can bring some sanity to the tar sands, the better off we'll be.

As I've done more research and learned more about the tar sands, the more concerned I get. Yes, the oil companies and the Alberta government and the federal government have started to take some steps to improve or mitigate the impacts of the tar sands; unfortunately, they are minimal and it's not clear that any of them will make any difference. In my opinion, it's insane for the GNWT or our residents of the NWT to buy fuel from the tar sands supplier who clearly disrespects the land, the water, the lifeblood of this Territory. Buying from them is like giving bullets to a crazed gunman who has a rifle pointed at your head and telling him to do as he pleases – go ahead and shoot.

What can we, as a small jurisdiction, do? I believe that we can actually do an awful lot.

Every year the Government of the Northwest Territories buys approximately 18 million liters of fuel for communities. Let's make sure that as little of this fuel comes from the tar sands as possible. Larger jurisdictions such as California, Florida, and here in Canada, BC and Ontario, have adopted low-carbon fuel standards already.

A low carbon fuel standard focuses not just on the greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fuel itself, but on how many greenhouse gases are produced to refine the fuel and transport it. A good low carbon fuel standard takes what is called a life-cycle approach. That is, it will look at a fuel's emissions from the “wells to the wheels”. It should also look at how changes in the land, such as cutting down trees contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. In California, they have committed to a 10% reduction in the greenhouse gas intensity of fuel used for transportation by 2020. Enforcing this standard would involve setting yearly targets and penalizing companies that don't meet that target.

The United States government has taken a different approach. A law is now on the books that states the US government will **not** buy any non-conventional oil that has higher than average greenhouse gas emissions. Canada and Alberta are lobbying furiously to make sure that that law is interpreted so it excludes the tar sands.

If a low carbon fuel standard is good enough for California, Florida, Ontario, British Columbia and the United States government, then why is it not good enough for the Northwest Territories? Commitment to a low-carbon standard will send a real message to the Government of Alberta in a language that they

will understand. By adopting this standard we will also be sending a message to the world that we do not accept or condone what Alberta is doing to our water or the environment in general. While our standard will have to be consistent with other larger jurisdictions, I think that in some ways it should be more ambitious. I think that this standard, at a minimum, should apply to all fuels bought by the GNWT. We may not be able avoid any tar sands oil, but I think we can and should minimize it as much as possible.

Currently when we, as residents of the NWT, buy fuel that comes from the tar sands we are actually supporting our potential demise. We are contributing to companies who's current practices undermine our potential existence here in the Mackenzie Basin. As a territory we must send a message to the Alberta government and the oil companies extracting bitumen that their current practices are unacceptable and that, unless they change how they produce oil we are unwilling to buy from them. They must protect our water.

A low-carbon fuel standard goes a long way to sending a clear message to these companies, the Government of Alberta and the federal government. It also ensures that we, as residents of the Northwest Territories, are not contributing to this potential disaster and are doing our part to protect this incredibly important water shed and the lifeblood of this Territory.

I've had some people suggest that a low-carbon fuel standard will affect some of our more expensive communities; communities where fuel has to be shipped during specific seasons such as Tuktoyaktuk, Sachs Harbour, and Paulatuk. Currently the fuel for these communities comes from Korea, British Columbia and California and is shipped by barge over the top. As a result, they would

not be affected in any way by the GNWT implementing a low-carbon fuel standard and the products they are buying already meet the low-carbon fuel standards of other jurisdictions. It is safe to assume that they'll meet ours as well.

Some members, Mr. Speaker, may be wondering, "will this cost more?" I believe that we can set a standard that will be meaningful and not cost us more money. As a note, if a cap and trade system is introduced in North America, then everyone will be paying more for tar sands oil anyway. There is a chance that we may have to pay a premium for a low-carbon fuel standard, but if we truly believe that water is "sacred", if we truly believe that "water is a human right", surely, then, we should be prepared to pay a small premium that will protect our water and the environment.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, the Pembina Institute released a paper on the impact of the tar sands on water in the Northwest Territories. It called for a moratorium on new tar sands leases until the tar sands cleaned up their act. The week before, the Dene Nation passed a motion calling for basically the same thing. They also called for a low carbon fuel standard for NWT communities.

Here in the NWT and across North America there is a growing desire to get the Alberta government and the tar sands companies to clean up their act. The message from the people of the NWT is clear: that people want this government to act and act effectively. We need to ratchet up our pressure on the Alberta government and I see adopting a low-carbon fuel standard for the Northwest Territories is the first step in this direction.

Does supporting this motion mean that we'll never buy fuel originally from the tar sands? No. It means once the companies producing oil from the Tar Sands and the Alberta Government implement production practices that don't jeopardize our water and reduce the amount of carbon consumed to produce the end product, they, too, can meet our low-carbon fuel standard. Once they do that, we'll be able to purchase from them again.

In 1947 a research engineer, Mr. Karl A. Clark said after studying the tar sands "I don't think there is any use trying to make out that the tar sands are other than a 'second line of defense' against dwindling oil supplies". Oil supplies are clearly dwindling around the world. Do the Tar Sands offer some reprieve as the world moves in a more responsible direction with clean energy? The tar sands are good for the Canadian economy. The tar sands will continue to be developed. However, just because they can and should be produced doesn't mean that it should be done irresponsibly and threaten other, potentially more valuable resources such as water. Mankind has put a man on the moon. Certainly mankind can find a responsible way to turn bitumen into oil that does not jeopardize the existence and health of the Mackenzie Basin. Our home.

Let's pass this motion and encourage the oil companies and the Alberta government to take our continued existence in our Territory seriously. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I support the motion.

Thank you.

With Research by Ecology North