



The Human Experience of the Husky Oil Spill

by Brigette DePape

(Left to right) Shelley Essauce, Barb Sauve and Diana Bird performed water ceremonies on the bank of the North Saskatchewan River following Husky Energy's recent oil spill. The spill resulted in close to 70,000 people losing access to clean drinking water.



Rick Sawa, Prince Albert, Council of Canadians Board member

Between 200,000 and 250,000 litres of crude oil and other material leaked into the North Saskatchewan River on Thursday, July 21, from a breach in a Husky Energy owned pipeline. Close to 70,000 people lost access to clean drinking water because of the spill. Clean-up efforts are ongoing. Below are a few stories from people who have been directly impacted by the spill.

RICK SAWA

Prince Albert, Council of Canadians Board member

What has been the impact of the spill on your community?

For us rural folk, we get our water from the city. They shut our water off completely for days. When they shut it off, we had water in our [holding] tanks, but we had to boil it and bleach our dishes after we washed them. They quickly set up bottled water that we could go pick up. We still can't drink it, but we can use it for everything else. When I asked where it comes from they couldn't tell me. It scared people because we did not know how long the water would be off – people said it could be weeks or even months.

What was it like for you on the day that it happened?

I was at home when I found out. When they first shut the water off it was

kind of frightening. A lot of people were in shock that this could happen to us, and some fear the long-term effect and wonder how soon we will have water. We got an email [from the Prince Albert Water Authority] saying they were shutting it off and that you needed to come pick up water. I did not have means to get water. Luckily, we had plans to go to a friend's cabin so we were okay there. We have to be very careful and use bath water to flush the toilet. It was a frightening experience, and we were woken up somewhat. We keep hearing that pipelines are the greatest thing. To me, this shows that they aren't!

What did you think of Husky's handling of the spill?

When we found out [Husky Energy] had been warned 14 hours ahead of time that was a bit disturbing. It took 14 hours before they did something.

What did you think of the government's response?

On the ground, I'm not sure what they are doing. Premier Brad Wall looks at this as an economic problem, not an environmental one. The deputy minister of the economy was the spokesperson for the spill, not the department of the environment. That was a bit odd.

The government is saying nobody died, whereas by rail we have deaths. They are saying we have to move [the crude] and need to choose the safest way to move it, that the only two options are pipelines or trains. But there's a third option: let's stop – or at least cut back – and start working towards renewables like many other countries across the world.

What can be done to help?

People can put pressure on the government to move away from oil and gas and to end subsidies, write letters to the editor, to MPs and MLAs.

LYLE BEAR

Muskoday First Nation

What has been the impact of the spill on your community?

For us First Nation people, water is sacred. It is the gift of life. We are taught by creator and our elders not to waste. Without it, none of us live. Animals, plants, trees. All life depends on this. Water is sacred to Indigenous people, particularly people in Muskoday First Nation.

The band has gone to great lengths to provide safe water to about 650 residents. A number of years ago, Muskoday had an agreement with Prince Albert and the Prince Albert rural water authority to provide water to the First Nation. We have a low-pressure water line that runs about 15 to 20 kilometres that services Muskoday.

After the spill at the Husky plant, Muskoday First Nation and all users were shut off without notice. Our Chief and Council declared a state of emergency.

Within the state of emergency we were cautioned to use good judgment and

use water in a sparing manner – no washing cars, no watering gardens, simply using water for daily necessities. We went under contract with a water deliverer from the Saskatoon area with water tankers to deliver water to our reservoirs. Bottled water was delivered every two days to the homes of elders. We will be under a boil water advisory for some time.

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- Shelley Essaunce

What did you think of the response from Husky?

As far as I know, Husky has not yet met with our Chief. There has been no compensation for the cost related to water delivery. Husky has committed to meet with each community to provide compensation for any hardship caused by the oil spill. First Nations share this land. In our treaties we signed that we will live in harmony with the newcomers, the Europeans that have come to share this land. They have been slow in reciprocating. People and industry can be reckless with the treatment of water. We need to take care of Mother Earth. We only have one Earth.

SHELLEY ESSAUNCE

Prince Albert

What has been the impact of the oil spill on your community?

The Husky oil spill has been quite devastating. On July 21, my world changed when we were told to stockpile water because of the oil plume

coming down the North Saskatchewan River where our intake pipe is for Prince Albert's water source. It was on Facebook that I heard that we were instructed to stockpile and I was panicked. I didn't know how much water to stockpile, for how long we would need to use the stockpiled water, and I was overcome with grief.

The morning of Monday July 25, when the oil plume had arrived in Prince Albert, I read about it on Twitter while still in bed. I burst into tears and wept. Such a loss of our water, our drinking water, the water that gave us life.

How have you responded to the spill?

I went into fight mode. I went to the river and I witnessed the oil slick and the scum streaming down the river from the dock. As Anishinabekwe, an Ojibway woman, I carry teachings about women and the water and I was asked to do water ceremonies. A group of three of us continued to do water ceremonies every day along the river for the first few weeks.

What is Husky doing to respond?

I am expecting that Husky “officials and experts” will tell us that the water is fine to use at some point.

Husky is apparently doing testing and saying that nature will take care of it and really we have nothing to worry about, so says their expert. I don't trust this. There are also independent assessors in town.

The Council of Canadians was one of several organizations that supported a grassroots-led independent assessment of the water after the spill occurred. The results showed that the spill spread much further because of Husky Energy's delay in reporting and responding, that the company has not been forthcoming about water testing or clean-up, and that people should have been warned earlier about the dangers with the water.

Brigette DePape is the Prairies Regional Organizer for the Council of Canadians.