

## **Oil firms 'negligent' at Suffield Wildlife areas damaged by industry: report**

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The oil and gas industry is failing to meet even basic environmental standards on military land encompassing one of Alberta's most fragile national wildlife areas, according to internal documents released by the Department of Defence.

The documents point to a litany of noncompliance issues at CFB Suffield -- the military base southeast of Calgary -- including soil contamination, abandoned and spilled materials, significant disturbances of lease sites and disregard for at-risk species.

The issues are highlighted in an environmental assessment report written and signed off one year ago by the Canadian military.

In the report, base commander Lt.-Col. Dan Drew said the base is not prepared to accept "such substandard performance from the oil and gas industry.

"These incidents appear to run counter to industry guidelines and standard practices, and illustrate an apparent lack of respect for the landowner and the lands themselves," Drew wrote in a prefacing letter dated Feb. 8, 2006.

"The base is not prepared to tolerate these types of destructive and negligent operating practices," added Drew.

The documents were obtained through the Access to Information Act by a coalition of environmental groups fighting industrial activities within a wildlife area inside the base.

The documents include an environmental audit carried out on 150 wells on base land in the spring of 2005 that found more than half failed environmental guidelines.

Another document finds oil and gas activity has had more of a detrimental impact on the environment than intensive British army combat exercises.

And another reported that EnCana built a 265-metre pipeline within the wildlife area without a permit.

"It's a pattern of behaviour," said Cliff Wallis, a biologist with the Alberta Wilderness Association. "It's not one-off incidents, it's a litany."

Next month, Calgary-based EnCana will file an environmental impact assessment for its proposal to drill 1,275 shallow gas wells within the wildlife reserve. The company already operates roughly 1,150 wells in the area.

About a dozen oilpatch companies operate on the base. However, EnCana is by far the largest.

EnCana spokeswoman Leanne Deighton said the concerns of environmental groups will be dealt with at the upcoming hearing, expected to begin in the fall in front of an independent, federally appointed panel.

She defended the energy giant's activity on the land, pointing to EnCana's involvement in helping establish the wildlife area four years ago.

"We are comfortable in that we are operating in an environmentally sound manner in the area," said Deighton, adding the company will file its environmental impact assessment in April.

The assessment will be open to public review and comment for 60 days.

The 2006 environmental incident report prepared by base environmental officer Wes Richmond found crude oil had been spilled at two well sites and had not been cleaned up. At one site, an oil plume had contaminated several hundred square metres of soil.

The wells were on land used for military training outside the wildlife area. However, the report said conditions discovered during the random inspection were likely "indicative of conditions throughout the Base."

The report also found that a variety of products -- including hazardous materials and lubricants -- had been discarded or abandoned "with no apparent concern for the environment."

"A lack of responsibility and supervision are evident at other sites, wherein examples of poor industry practices and lackadaisical housekeeping abound," writes Richmond.

The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, which regulates the oil and gas industry in the province, is aware of environmental concerns on the base.

However, spokesman Darin Barter said the board was not aware of any serious breaches within the wildlife area. He said specific complaints should be taken to the EUB.

"If something is raised as a concern, we want to hear about it," said Barter. "If they are not following our regulations, we should be involved in it."

CFB Suffield is one of the the largest military training centres in the world. It encompasses large tracts of prairie, including a 458-square kilometre wildlife area at the base's eastern boundary.

In 2003, the area was officially designated under the Canada Wildlife Act as the Suffield National Wildlife Area.

About half the size of Prince Edward Island, the area is one of the last large expanses of mixed-grass prairie left in Canada.

It's home to more than 1,100 catalogued species, including 82 that are listed either provincially or federally as at-risk or sensitive species.

It's also home to four endangered species -- including the burrowing owl and the swift fox -- three threatened species and seven species of special concern, including the short-eared owl and the ferruginous hawk.

An environmental assessment track report prepared in February 2006 by the Department of National Defence -- which manages the lands -- said further industrial development in the wildlife area could disturb or destroy at-risk species and/or critical habitats.

The swath of land -- which is not protected from oil and gas activity -- has seen a dramatic increase in well development. Between 2000 and 2005, crews drilled 3,503 wells on the base, four times the number of wells drilled in the previous six-year period.

Daniel Casselman, spokes-man for the non-profit conservation group Nature Canada, said the military documents back up claims by environmentalists that industry is damaging the Suffield wildlife area.

"It's 10 times as disturbing because here we have an operator that can't really be trusted to be environmentally responsible," said Casselman. "They have proven to us that they are not."

Casselman -- whose Ottawa-based group acts as an umbrella network for more than 350 naturalist organizations across Canada -- said the wildlife area should be protected from any industrial development.

"If we see large-scale industrial development in one of them, what does that hold for the rest of them?" he said.

Officials from CFB Suffield declined to comment on the documents.

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