



Petroleum Histories Project Gathering Report

March 7-9, 2023
Norman Wells, NT

OVERVIEW

The Petroleum Histories Project hosted its first in-person gathering at the Legion in Norman Wells from March 7 to 9, 2023. Nineteen people attended the gathering. The participants included community members from Norman Wells, Tulit'a, and Fort Good Hope; SRRB staff and contractors; and collaborators from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the Gwich'in Tribal Council's River Journeys team.

The focus of the event was on gathering stories about the history of oil at Norman Wells and documenting community concerns about and observed impacts of exploration and extraction activities on land, water, wildlife, and Dene and Métis ts'lı (way of life). The gathering was also an opportunity for members of the research team to share what they had been learning through archival research, study circles, fieldwork, and digital atlas development with community participants.

With a couple of exceptions, there wasn't an agenda. Rather the discussions and activities took their direction from the stories and knowledge being shared by the participants. Here is the list of activities and discussion topics:

TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
Welcome	Reflecting on Day One	Debrief of Imperial Oil's Presentation and Tour
Opening Prayer	Mapping Activity	Environmental Assessment Process
Introductions	Presentation by Imperial Oil	Closure and Reclamation Planning
Project Background/Update	Tour of Imperial Oil Facilities	Charlie Barnaby's Story
Working at Imperial/Living in Norman Wells	Movie Night	Designing an Updated Sahtú Atlas
Impacts in the Archive		Closing Remarks

There were two special events as part of the gathering:

a. Imperial Presentation and Tour

On Wednesday afternoon, four staff from Imperial Oil came to the Legion to present to the group. They offered a history of the Norman Wells facilities from their perspective and an overview of current thinking on closure and reclamation.

Attendees learned that currently Imperial intends to start closure and reclamation in five to ten years. Imperial representatives suggested that with the higher price of oil, the Norman Wells operations are once again profitable, which may be why closure is no longer imminent. They will use the time between now and then to plan for closure and reclamation. They estimate that closure and reclamation could take more than twenty years. Imperial is planning to pursue an environmental assessment for closure and reclamation.

We learned that the pipeline that leaked produced water last summer is still not operational, which means the wells that the pipeline connects to the processing facility are not currently producing. Imperial is planning to replace this pipeline, a process that will require horizontal drilling under the Mackenzie River to Bear Island. Imperial staff suggested that the current Sahtú Land and Water Board permit for Imperial covers the proposed directional drilling activity.

Gathering participants raised both questions and concerns during the Q & A about: plans for closure; the consultation process; ownership of the wells/oil; production over the lifespan of the facilities; the flow of information from Imperial to the communities; the monitoring of abandoned wells; mercury in the fish; downstream impacts of the islands; and waste management.

Following the presentation, participants loaded onto a bus for a tour of the Imperial facilities. The tour included a number of stops, though participants remained on the bus. Stops included: the biocell facility; the site of the old refinery; the wharf for a view of the islands; the processing facility; the flare stack; and Enbridge's pumping station.

b. Movie Night

On Wednesday, March 8, the Petroleum Histories Project hosted a public movie night at the Legion. The twenty-two attendees watched five short films that are part of the River Journeys exhibit at the Dehcho Heritage Centre in Łíídlı̥ Kuké (Fort Simpson). Three of the five films were about the Sahtú, documenting stories by John T'seleie, Leon Andrew, and Raymond Yakeleya. The other two films were directed by Arlyn Charlie, who was in attendance. Dèeddho Gòonlii had its NWT premier at the gathering.

WHAT WE HEARD

Both the elders and the younger participants emphasized Tłegóhłı (Norman Wells) as homeland. They spoke about the stretch of the river where Imperial has been operating for over one hundred years as a place of abundance. It is a place that is critical habitat for migratory birds, a place of fish migration, a place frequented by moose. It is a place that has sustained Dene and Métis for generations. The relationship between Dene and Métis and this area is ancient, historic, and ongoing.

The arrival of Imperial Oil to the Sahtú in 1920 disrupted but has not severed this relationship.

To date, the history of petroleum extraction at Norman Wells has mostly been told by Imperial, different levels of government, and non-Indigenous researchers. Local Dene and Métis have their own stories about and experiences of Imperial's operations at Norman Wells and the impacts of these operations across the region. Some of these stories were shared during the meetings. They include stories about: the "discovery" of oil; the transportation of oil up the Bear River to Port Radium; the various ways that local people contributed to the CANOL project, including performing remediation work; working for Imperial over the years; the Berger Inquiry; and living in Norman Wells, where the social impacts of Imperial's presence have been most visible. The stories shared during the gathering make clear that Imperial's operations are one part of a larger system of colonization that includes residential school, theft of Indigenous knowledges and practices, and exploitation of the land and animals.

There was consensus amongst participants that these stories need to be documented and shared. They believe that these stories and the knowledge they contain is important for closure and reclamation planning and work. They want young people in the region and future generations to know what has happened at Norman Wells. They also want people outside of the Sahtú to know about this part of the Northwest Territories. Conscious of oil reserves near Tulít'a and gas reserves near Colville Lake, the participants want to ensure that future development in the region is different, that it involves and benefits local communities and is environmentally responsible.

Concerns about the environmental, health, and social impacts of the Norman Wells oilfields are not new. As early as 1925, K'áhsho Got'łne of Fort Good Hope were communicating concerns about the impacts of oil in the river on fish. Over the last one hundred years, environmental concerns have included:

- impacts of oil spills on water and animals (birds, moose, fish, etc.);
- impacts of hydrocarbons and other contaminants on fish;
- impacts of flaring on small animals, like rabbits and ptarmigan;
- impacts of air pollution; and
- impacts of the islands on the river and fish migration.

Participants also communicated concerns about the impacts of petroleum extraction on human health both historically and in the present day, and the social impacts of Imperial's operations at Norman Wells over the last century, including: the differential treatment of Imperial workers and local people; alcohol; transient workers; lack of opportunities for training and education in Sahtú communities; and empty homes during a housing shortage.

The three Sahtú communities represented at the gathering share concerns about the impact that oil extraction has had on the land and people, but they also have concerns that are specific to their geographic relationship to Imperial's operations. The people of Fort Good Hope have long been and remain concerned about the

downstream impacts of the Norman Wells oilfields, namely the consequences for their drinking water and the fish they depend on. Looking toward closure, they wonder how removing all of Imperial's infrastructure will impact the river, the water, and the fish. For Dene and Métis living in Norman Wells, both the environmental and social impacts of Imperial's operations are part of their day-to-day lives. These include buried waste, oil spills, and racism. Tulít'a people spoke about the impacts of drilled and abandoned wells (e.g. Bluefish) in their district, as well being on the route between Norman Wells and Port Radium.

There was consensus that the people of the Sahtú have born the costs of petroleum extraction and received few benefits beyond limited employment opportunities. More commonly, the participants spoke about the disparity in the standard of living between community members and Imperial employees; the lack of investment in the community by Imperial relative to the wealth that has been generated at Norman Wells; and the impacts to Dene and Métis ts'íl.

Imperial's existing closure and reclamation plan focuses on the Norman Wells Proven Area. However, as this brief list makes clear, community concerns extend far beyond the boundaries of the proven area. They include abandoned wells, sites related to the CANOL project (including the camps and pipeline route), and the transportation route that connected Norman Wells to Port Radium. Participants voiced a number of concerns related to closure and reclamation, chief among them was the future of the islands and waste management.

Likewise, community members' concerns about Imperial's operations are not limited to the Norman Wells oilfields. They also have concerns about facilities that are further upstream, including the Kearl site in the oilsands. These concerns have been particularly acute since it came to light that ongoing seepages from tailings ponds were not being communicated to local communities or those downstream. There was a similar lack of communication about a spill of produced water at the Norman Wells facility in 2022. Participants noted that it is difficult to trust Imperial when they find out about spills too late if at all.

Climate change was a theme throughout the gathering. Participants talked about the changes they have been seeing in the land and the animals, like landslides along the banks of the river, declines in fish populations like grayling, and the appearance of new species like salmon. They are unsettled by these changes but not necessarily surprised by them. Just as their ancestors anticipated the coming of white people, they foretold many of these changes.

Another theme was the future. The elders in the room shared about the old days for the younger people in the room to emphasize the importance of being strong, working together, and knowing how to be on the land. Participants of all ages want their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on to be able to live off the land as they and their ancestors have done, though they recognize that it is next to impossible for the Norman Wells oilfields to be returned to their pre-development state.

In the future, Sahtú Dene and Métis want to be involved in development from the beginning. They want companies and governments to take their knowledge and concerns seriously. They want to ensure that development takes place with their participation and consent.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Should the people downstream of the oilsands, including people in the Sahtú, be concerned about spills from the oilsands?
- Is it safe to eat the fish from the Mackenzie River?
- Does Imperial have a file of spill reports for the Norman Wells facilities?
- Does Imperial have a map of active and abandoned wells?
- Is Imperial or the government monitoring the abandoned wells at Bluefish? What about the other abandoned wells in the region?
- What data exists from monitoring over the years?
 - There used to be air monitoring stations on the winter road to Fort Good Hope. Where is that information?
 - What about grayling studies? One of the participants reported seeing less grayling in Bluefish Creek, the site of two abandoned wells.
- Who owns the oil at Norman Wells? Who owns the wells? Does the government have anything to do with it?
- How many barrels of oil have been extracted over the last 100 years? How much water has been used?
- Where are things buried in Norman Wells? Along the CANOL?
- Is there available GIS data for the evolution of the Norman Wells facilities/town sites?
- How will Imperial dismantle their facilities? What will happen to the waste?
- What kinds of monitoring programs will be put in place after closure?

NEXT STEPS

- Finish the history study circles—there are four more—this spring.
- Continue work on the short film based on Charlie Barnaby's testimony to the Berger Inquiry about a serious oil spill at Norman Wells in 1943.
- Start the closure and reclamation planning study circles in the fall.
- Organize additional study circles to:
 - review and evaluate which data should be incorporated into the digital atlas being developed with NAIT, and
 - review and analyze fieldwork data.

- Review data sharing permissions for archival data to be incorporated into the digital atlas.
- Visit the five communities to interview elders who are not well enough to travel to in-person gatherings.
- Host more in-person gatherings.
- Secure additional funding for the project to support interviews, fieldwork, and future gatherings.