

# Petroleum Histories Project Gathering Report

**“Water is  
sacred and land  
is memory.”**

Frederick Andrew Jr. (Tulít'a)

May 2025

# Introduction

The Petroleum Histories Project hosted a gathering at the Legion in Norman Wells May 6-8, 2025. Twenty-six people attended the gathering in person; four people attended virtually. The participants included community members from the five Sahtú communities (Norman Wells, Fort Good Hope, Tulít'a, Délıne, and Colville Lake); SRRB staff and contractors; and collaborators from the University of Calgary.

This was the second regional gathering of the Petroleum Histories Project. The first was held in Norman Wells in March 2023. This gathering was originally scheduled for July 2024, but was postponed because of the forest fires.

The objectives of the May 2025 gathering were:

- To provide an update on the activities of the Petroleum Histories Project.
- To visit sites both on and off the Imperial lease that are important to the history of oil and gas.
- To gather stories and knowledge about the history and impacts of Norman Wells oil in the Sahtú.
- To identify priorities for future project activities and how the stories and knowledge gathered through this project should be shared.

“It is our history, it is our land and our people, that is why we fight so hard.”

- *Brenda T'seleie-Pierrot (Fort Good Hope)*

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 Opening Prayer Introductions Goals for the Gathering Project Update Sharing Circle	Reflecting on Day One Bus Tour of Imperial Oil Facilities	Reflecting on Imperial Oil Tour Student Presentations
The Imperial Oil Archives Photo Session	Lunch at Imperial Question and Answer Session	Thinking Forward: Bringing This History Alive



# Highlights

## Photo Session

On Tuesday afternoon, archivist Kim Geraldí gave a short presentation about the Imperial Oil collection at the University of Calgary. The records in the collection are primarily from 1880-1990 and include 260m of textual records; 30m of photographs; 550 sound recordings; 527 television commercials; and 1700 video recordings.

With the help of graduate research assistant Andrew Goodwin, Kim had pulled together and printed 26 photographs from the Imperial collections that feature Sahtú people. Four sets of the photographs were placed on tables at the back of the hall for gathering participants to look at and discuss.

The photographs prompted memories and stories about the past. Participants were also able to correct some misinformation in the captions and provide additional details about the people and places in the photographs.



# Imperial Oil Tour

On Wednesday afternoon, gathering participants went on a bus tour of Imperial Oil's mainland facilities. A dump of snow earlier in the week impacted what tour participants were able to see and do, but the landscape was more visible than during the bus tour in March 2023.

The tour included stops at the Bosworth Creek bridge; the pump station for Enbridge's Line 21; the settling ponds; the wharf, where there is a view of the natural and artificial islands; the site of the old refinery; the biocell facility; and the central processing facility. Participants were able to get off the bus at the wharf. They observed a large group of geese resting on a sandbar downstream of the wharf.

Community members shared knowledge and stories about different locations visited during the site tour, including the story behind Goose Island, working on the PortCo, and the old army caboos on Bosworth Creek that has names of CANOL project workers in it.

Gathering participants also raised questions and concerns during the tour and the question and answer session at the central processing facility about a wide range of topics related to the past, present, and future of Imperial Oil's Norman Wells operation. These included community involvement in environmental monitoring; water usage in the operations; current remediation and reclamation projects; the aquatic effects monitoring program (AEMP); poor communications, especially in regards to spills and other environmental issues; impacts of the operation to water, fish, and wildlife; abandoned wells and sumps outside of the proven area; and downstream impacts of the operations, including spills and the islands.



There was a lengthy debrief of the visit to Imperial on Thursday morning. Some of the feedback from that debrief is included in the next section (“What We Heard”).



## Drum Dance

On Wednesday evening, there was a drum dance at the Mackenzie Mountain School initiated by Chief Frank Andrew (Tulít'a) and attended by gathering participants, Imperial staff, and community members. Chief Frank spoke about the importance of continuing Dene traditions of gathering to drum and dance, but also the need for fun and joy to counter the heaviness of the things being discussed in the meetings.



# Student Presentations

Two graduate students from the University of Calgary—Andrew Goodwin (PhD candidate) and Areej Syed Naqvi (MA student)—have been supporting the project for the last two years. Among other things, Andrew and Areej have been working to answer two questions raised by community members during study circles and in-person gatherings about: a. the frequency and scale of spill events, and b. people who have been injured or died as a result of Imperial Oil’s operations at Norman Wells. On Thursday afternoon, Areej and Andrew presented the results of their archival research.

Areej presented about the spills database that she and Andrew have populated over the last two years. The database includes reported spills from the Norman Wells operations from 1973 to 2024. The total volume of reported spills in this time (51 years) is 169,677,694.7 litres. Spilled petroleum products include crude oil, fuel oil, gasoline, lubricating oil, natural gas, bunker/asphalt/propane, “unknown” petroleum, and waste oil. Non-petroleum products include hydrochloric acid, methanol, drilling mud, “chemicals,” “mixed load,” and wastewater.

The most readily accessible written records of injuries and deaths in relation to the Norman Wells oil field are from the CANOL Project (see text box). This was the subject of Andrew’s presentation. Between 1942 and 1945, at least 26 people died in connection with the CANOL Project. The vast majority were US Army personnel. Some were employees of Imperial Oil (who operated the oil field) and Bechtel-Price-Callahan (the contractor responsible for constructing the pipeline). Most of the deaths were caused by accidents on site and crashes while travelling.

CANOL stands for Canadian Oil. It was a joint project between the governments of Canada and the United States to ensure crude oil supply for the Pacific during World War II. The project had three main components:

1. increase production of the Norman Wells oil field by drilling new wells;
2. build a pipeline from Norman Wells to Whitehorse; and
3. construct a refinery at Whitehorse.

# Sharing Stories

On the final afternoon of the gathering, members of the project team shared some of the communications materials that have been made so far.

## 01. Dashboards

Two interactive dashboards with the location and relevant information (e.g. drill date, well type, ID number, and status) of active, suspended, and abandoned wells within the Norman Wells Proven Area; and the location and relevant information of suspended and abandoned wells in the Sahtú region. These dashboards are not yet public.

## 02. Information Sheets

Four plain-language information sheets on the following topics: the history of environmental assessment of Imperial Oil's Norman Wells operations; the Norman Wells Proven Area; the CANOL Project; and Treaty 11 and oil. Drafts of the info sheets were shared with participants for their feedback.

## 03. Blog Post

One blog post that was cross-posted on [ActiveHistory.ca](http://ActiveHistory.ca) and [NiCHE-Canada.org](http://NiCHE-Canada.org) introducing the Petroleum Histories Project and inviting readers to see the history of the Norman Wells oil fields through the eyes and stories of Sahtú Dene and Métis.

## 04. Short Films

Two short films. The first is an introduction to the production that features Leon Andrew and Jonathan Yakeleya. It is available on the Petroleum Histories Project page on the SRRB website. The second is an animation that brings to life Charlie Barnaby's story about a burst oil tank at Norman Wells in 1943. It is not yet publicly available.

The group also discussed two written documents that are in process. The first is about the history and impacts of Norman Wells oil from the perspective of Sahtú Dene and Métis. The second is a critical settler history of the Norman Wells oil field.

The response to the materials produced to date for the project was positive. Gathering participants affirmed the importance of having written documentation of the history and impacts of oil and gas in the region. They also spoke about the need for more materials that will reach and engage young people, including lesson plans for the schools and more videos.

# What We Heard

“This is our homeland. It’s the homeland of the wildlife. If you destroy it, they get displaced, we get displaced. As Dene, we’re meant to be who we are here in our homeland.”

– Leon Andrew (Tulít’a/Norman Wells)

“If there is an impact on our land, we are the ones who would feel the impacts...We have to think about our grandchildren and the ones on the land and the negative impacts we would be feeling. We want our young people, future generations, to have a good life as well.”

– Dolphus Baton (Déljñę)



Community members re-affirmed many of the key themes from the March 2023 gathering, including:

- Tłegóhłı (Norman Wells) is homeland. It is 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.
- It is important that Sahtú Dene and Métis stories and knowledge about the history and impacts of oil in the region be preserved and shared for future generations.
- The people of the Sahtú have born the costs of petroleum extraction and received few benefits beyond limited employment opportunities.
- Future development in the region must involve and benefit local communities and be environmentally responsible.

“In 1980, I was here. Four hundred men came to build the islands in the river. Fish have migration patterns. They were impacted by the artificial islands. The oil destroyed all that. It’s not the same anymore. The oil really impacts our way of travelling, the channels, on the Mackenzie River. Underwater oil pipelines aren’t going to last forever. They will burst, like the one near Bear Island that broke, and when they do that, the oil seeps down the river again and it impacts again. It’s just heartbreaking, just talking about it. But we have to talk about it. All the young people here around the room at the table, they don’t know about it.”

– Frederick Andrew Jr. (Tulít’a)

Other themes emerged during the 2025 gathering. Frederick's quotation on the last page captures three of these themes: the importance of water, the emotional toll of oil and gas development, and the need to have youth learning about this history.

## 01. The trauma associated with oil and gas development.

A number of the participants spoke about the physical, mental, and emotional pain associated with this history and the work of bringing these stories forward. "It breaks your heart," Frederick Andrew (Tulit'a) said, in reference to contamination and the impacts to land, water, wildlife, and people. "We are tired and frustrated and scared," Lisa McDonald (Norman Wells) said. "Tired of telling the same stories over and over, frustrated that nothing is changing, and scared of what is getting left behind for our youth and the grandchildren."

"We, as Dene, we depend on our water from the river. Also wildlife, they go down to drink it."

– Camilla Rabisca (Fort Good Hope)

## 02. The importance of water.

All of the participants talked about the importance of water for all living things, including fish, animals, and people. They also talked about the need to ensure that water is kept free of contaminants. Participants are particularly concerned about water because of the low water levels in the region, but especially on the big river.

The topic of water was especially important for participants from Fort Good Hope. Fort Good Hope is the closest downstream community to Imperial's Norman Wells operations. Fort Good Hope draws their drinking water from the Mackenzie River.

“My concern is with any of the activities that may affect the conditions of the Mackenzie River because we are one of the very few communities that extracts drinking water directly from the Mackenzie River, which goes directly below Norman Wells, the site of Imperial Oil.”

- Tommy Kakfwi (Fort Good Hope)

Participants urged Imperial to involve local people in water quality testing and other monitoring activities. They also discussed putting increased pressure on the Sahtú Land and Water Board to ensure water in the region is protected from overuse and contamination.

### 03. The need to expand the scope of the project.

Imperial Oil’s operations at Norman Wells have had a devastating impact on the land, water, wildlife, and people of the Sahtú. However, the history of oil and gas in the region extends far beyond the Norman Wells Proven Area.

Gathering participants affirmed the importance of the sumps research that was initiated in 2024 in part because every community has abandoned and suspended wells in their territory. They requested that more work be done on the history and impacts of oil and gas across the region, not just in relation to Norman Wells.

“There is a lot of sumps all over where the oil companies were drilling. They put dirty water in, chemicals, salt. The water is seeping out. They have to clean it up.”

- George Barnaby (Fort Good Hope)

“Because of climate change, the sumps are caving in, and they are big. Wildlife falling through. It is the wildlife I am concerned about, the caribou and moose because they are curious, and they like to eat on the site.”

– Frederick Andrew Jr. (Tulít’a)

#### 04. The importance of youth participation.

Gathering participants made clear that young people need to know about the history and impacts of the operations of Imperial Oil and other oil and gas companies in the Sahtú. Without this knowledge, there is a good chance that similar things will happen in the future.

Recognizing the importance of youth involvement in the project, SRRB staff reached out to youth in all five Sahtú communities to invite them to the gathering. There was limited interest in attending. Nevertheless, four youth were scheduled to come. Two did not get on the plane. Two arrived late on the first day and left mid-afternoon the same day. They did not attend the rest of the gathering.

Gathering participants discussed some of the issues that are preventing youth participation, including drugs and alcohol.

“Talking about youths, the SRRB has been trying really hard for years to get the youth involved. It’s really hard to do and they just prefer to go somewhere else. We are still struggling with that. It would be good to have young people get involved. We enjoy our land, and water.”

– Leon Andrew (Tulít’a/Norman Wells)

# Next Steps

## 01. Finalize info sheets.

Incorporate feedback and finalize info sheets about: Treaty 11 and oil; CANOL Project; Norman Wells Proven Area; and environmental assessments.

## 02. Draft new info sheets.

Draft info sheets about documented spills (1973–2024) and fatalities on the CANOL Project.

## 03. Expand spills database.

Expand spills database to include all of the Sahtú region.

## 04. Increase youth participation.

Develop a strategy to improve youth participation in the project.

## 05. Share Charlie's story.

Reach out to Charlie Barnaby's family about making animated film based on his testimony to the Berger Inquiry public.

## 06. Complete written histories.

Complete drafts of two written histories (Sahtú Dene and Métis history, and critical settler history).

## 07. Continue interviews.

Continue to record interviews with Elders and knowledge holders.

## 08. Plan gathering.

Plan archives and storytelling workshop in Calgary (summer 2026).

## 09. Educate children and youth.

Explore how petroleum histories can be brought to the schools.

## 10. Host on the land camp.

Host on the land camp so young people can learn the history and understand why protecting the land is important.