

The potential danger of natural gas

BY DAVID WIMBERLY

Plans are being discussed to connect a chemical pollutant to various Nova Scotia institutions, hospitals and homes. The potentially dangerous chemical is natural gas and would come from the planned Sable Island fields.

Natural gas is a potential asphyxiant, a powerful sensitizing agent and it contains quantities of impurities and additives that may include radon and other radioactive materials. Use of this gas creates nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, fine particulates, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and volatile organic compounds including formaldehyde.

According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 20 per cent of Canadians are "unusually sensitive" to natural gas. In Nova Scotia, the number is even higher, with figures putatively as high as 1/3 of the population. The *British Medical Journal* has linked natural gas with increases in asthma and other respiratory illnesses, especially those in young women.

The introduction of this potential health hazard into our schools, hospitals and homes is being advocated by a panel chaired by Professor Bob Fournier of Dalhousie University. Furthermore, the Fournier Panel is refusing to listen to documented evidence alluding to the adverse health effects linked to these chemicals.

The panel has stated that "the proponents [of the project] have submitted that such health impacts should not be considered to be an effect caused by the proposed projects." But this ignores a potential health hazard.

Industry proponents have refused requests to divulge the exact chemical components of this particular supply, and the Fournier Panel has refused to make them do so.

The vast majority of informa-

tion published on natural gas is by those who stand to benefit from its sales. Just go Web-crawling to prove the point. There are hundreds of websites, put up by industry, extolling the benefits of gas.

Virtually all of the public examinations of the environmental effects of natural gas have focused on the fact that gas produces less carbon when burned than oil or

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coal. This ignores the fact that new petro-chemical supplies tend to add to the total aggregate combustion, rather than replace one fuel for another. Thus, adding new gas will actually contribute to additional global warming and further environmental degradation.

When gas replaces oil or coal, it is a superior alternative for the generation of electrical energy. This must not be used, however, as an opportunity to waste environmental savings by generating yet more electricity. If electrical generation is expanded, then any gains are largely lost. Nova Scotia industry and government seem to argue that cheaper gas is an opportunity to expand industry and housing, thus increasing energy consumption, which, in

turn, ravages the environment.

Another important development concerning the use of natural gas is the new understanding of chemical sensitization and environmental illness. Dalhousie is a world leader in this area. It would be courting disaster to add to our already overstressed immune systems the single factor most strongly contributing to environmental illness. If we restrict natural gas use in this province to electrical energy generation, we will save ourselves from numerous additional and/or worsened debilitating cases of environmentally-induced illness/chemical sensitivity. That will save a great deal of money and human suffering.

The threat of significant indoor air pollution from installation of natural gas is a very serious situation. Can we change the course away from disaster?

The first step is for the Fournier Panel to do the right thing and agree to consider the health effects of using natural gas. The local use of the gas is definitely a consequence of the Sable Gas Project. The negative health consequences must be considered and guarded against.

David Wimberly writes as a member of the Intervention Coalition On The Proposed Sable Island Gas Pipeline Project of the Allergy and Environmental Health Association - Nova Scotia (AEHA-NS). For more information <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/6847/> is our website. You can also call the AEHA-NS Intervention Coalition at 477-4022 or 826-7846

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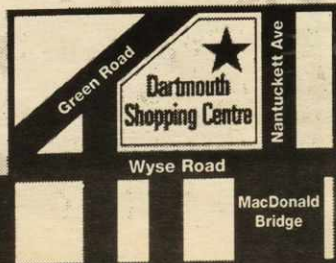
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