

Federal study shows water from tailings ponds leaching into Athabasca River

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/oilsands-study-confirms-tailings-found-in-groundwater-river-1.2545089>

[CBC News](#) Posted: Feb 20, 2014 11:59 AM MT Last Updated: Feb 21, 2014 7:08 AM MT



An Environment Canada study found tailings are leaching into groundwater around oilsands mining operations. (Jeff McIntosh/Canadian Press)

New federal research confirms that Alberta's oilsands are polluting ground water and seeping into the Athabasca River.

The industry has maintained that toxic chemicals are contained safely in tailing ponds, but new research shows this isn't the case.

Oilsands study confirms tailings found in groundwater, river

Written by Joan Russow

Friday, 21 February 2014 12:20 - Last Updated Friday, 21 February 2014 12:25

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“Well, it looks like what they’ve seen is that in fact the tailings ponds are leaking,” said Bill Donahue, environmental scientist with the oilsands advisory committee.

“They found also not only are those tailings ponds leaking, but it looks like it is flowing pretty much from those tailings ponds, through the ground and into the Athabasca River.”

“So, there goes ... that message we’ve been hearing about. ‘These tailings ponds are safe, they don’t leak’ and so on.”

Previous studies using models have estimated the leakage at 6.5 million litres a day from a single pond.

But the Environment Canada study used new technology to actually fingerprint the mix of groundwater chemicals in the area.

It found the mix of chemicals from tailings is different from that in naturally occurring bitumen deposits.

That tailings mix, which contains toxic chemicals, is found in groundwater around mining operations, but not in areas away from development.

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The Pembina Institute, an environmental research group, has long said the ponds leak. But analyst Erin Flanagan said the new research shows even Pembina underestimated how much.

"As we continue to expand the industry, we're also expanding the production of tailings waste."

The study, conducted under a new federal-provincial oilsands monitoring program, was accepted for publication in late January by the journal [Environmental Science and Technology](#) .

The federal scientists were not available. The Alberta government says the research is of interest, but doesn't confirm anything.

With files from The Canadian Press