

January 7, 2011

Hon. Thomas Lukaszuk, Minister
Employment and Immigration Department
Alberta Employment and Immigration
#418 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Lukaszuk:

I write to you today in response to the serious explosion and fire at the Canadian Natural Horizon upgrader in Fort MacKay, Alberta, on January 6, 2011.

The explosion was massive and unprecedented. Here in Alberta we have decades of experience with oil sands plants – and we've definitely seen coker fires before. But, to the best of my knowledge, never has a coker completely blown apart, as the Horizon coker did yesterday.

The good news is that we were lucky: lucky that only five people were injured, instead of 50 or 500; lucky that no one died; and lucky that the nearby community of Fort MacKay wasn't more seriously affected.

But, as I'm sure you will agree, good luck is not enough. When it comes to the operation of plants at the heart of our province's most important industry, Albertans need to know that all possible measures are being taken to protect both human life and the environment.

That's why I'm writing to you today: I want to urge you to give your department's investigation of this incident the highest possible priority. The investigation needs to be thorough. It needs to be timely. And it needs to be transparent and as public as possible.

These last two points (timeliness and transparency) are particularly important given what's happened with your government's response to the last major accident that occurred on the Horizon site: the tragic tank farm collapse of April 2007 that claimed the lives of two temporary foreign workers and injured four others.

Nearly three years have passed since that incident and we still don't know what happened. We don't know what problems were at the root of the collapse and we don't what steps, if any, have been taken to fix those problems.

To put it bluntly: what has happened with the investigation into the tank farm collapse simply can't be allowed to happen to the investigation into the coker explosion.

Like most other Albertans, we in the labour movement support the oil sands industry and we want to see it thrive: but in order to maintain public confidence, your government needs to reassure Albertans that the industry is safe and that adequate systems for government regulation and oversight are in place. Public confidence will not be maintained if the public is forced to wait two or three years for answers.

In addition to urging you to devote the necessary time and resources to your department's safety investigation of the explosion, I am also calling on the province to establish a special Expert Advisory Panel (similar to panels used in other provinces) to conduct an investigation into the rapid pace of development in the oil sands. The panel would be asked to address the following question: has the pace of development in the oil sands compromised worker and/or public safety and, if so, what steps should be taken to mitigate the problems?

The Panel should report to the Legislature and be given a tight timeline for its work. Alberta's health and safety codes and practices have come under increasing negative scrutiny in recent months but concrete action by the province has been slow. By contrast, similar negative attention and a string of horrific worksite fatalities in Ontario caused the government there to act far more swiftly than we have seen in this province – Ontario struck an Expert Advisory Panel in March 2010, and the Panel made a series of comprehensive recommendations by December. An Expert Advisory Panel should be comprised of representatives from organized labour, construction and other affected industries, small business, and academics.

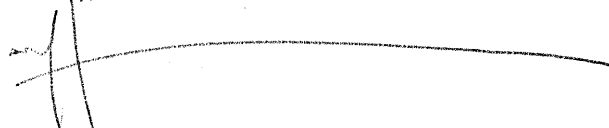
We feel strongly that Alberta must conduct a thorough review of the impact of the rapid pace of development and its impact on health and safety in the workplace before we head into yet another boom in the oil sands. If we do not, more lives will be lost, more workers will be injured or maimed, and Alberta's reputation as a safe place to work and do business will continue to be tarnished.

We know – everyone in Alberta knows – that many companies cut corners during boom times, when labour is in short supply, input material costs are rapidly escalating, and there are international pressures in getting projects finished quickly. The question is whether the Government of Alberta will allow this situation to repeat itself yet again, with tragic results for so many workers and their families.

It is worth noting that this is not the first time Canadian Natural has been involved in serious workplace incidents. Fully 21 percent of the serious incidents where charges under the Occupational Health and Safety Act have been filed (but not yet proven in court) involve Canadian Natural. Canadian Natural has been charged in connection with four fatalities and three injuries dating from 2006, and they are the most-often charged company listed by the Department of Employment and Immigration.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



**Gil McGowan, President
Alberta Federation of Labour**