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NEWS LOCAL

Wood Buffalo Environmental Association running on emergency fund



By Vincent McDermott
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An aerial view of Fort McMurray's oil sands. (Erika Beauchesne/QMI Agency)

The Wood Buffalo Environmental Association will be running on emergency savings in January, after the environmental organization failed to pass a budget during a Wednesday general meeting.

During the general meeting, stakeholders debated passing a \$4 million budget for the first quarter of 2014. However the motion was opposed by industry stakeholders — which included Shell, Syncrude, Suncor and CNRL.

The group then held a secret ballot for a reduced \$3.6 million budget, but the motion also failed to pass.

Finally, the group's board of directors approved dipping into their \$2 million emergency fund to make it through January.

"We have sufficient contingency funds to continue monitoring in January," said Kevin Percy, executive director of WBEA.

"The members yesterday did decide to call a special board meeting during the third week of January to straighten this out. My expectation will be that the budget issue will be resolved."

The group's financial future beyond Feb. 1 is still unknown, however Peter Fortna of the Fort McKay Métis believes the budget issue will have to be resolved, since WBEA has the most sophisticated air monitoring system in the region.

"WBEA is a very important organization with good employees that do good work. It's frustrating our budgeting is being controlled by outside influences," said Fortna. "We just need to pass a budget. It's getting crazy."

Representatives from industry groups did not respond to interview requests by press time.

WBEA, which is made up of 37 member organizations, was established in 1997 to monitor air quality in the oilsands region. The organization represents environmental, industry, aboriginal and government stakeholders. It also operates 15 air monitoring stations and 20 passive monitoring stations.

"WBEA is a one-stop shop for air monitoring here," said Daniel Stuckless, environmental manager for the Fort McKay First Nation.

"We're not in a great situation. We need to get back together as a group in (the) new year and get to a place where we all can agree and get an approved budget passed."

The lack of a budget for the new year is problematic for the Joint Oil Sands Monitoring panel. WBEA, which is a member of JOSM, is supposed to provide air monitoring for the program.

The program, which was formed in February 2012, monitors biodiversity in the oilsands region.

However, JOSM has already lost the support of Fort McKay's Métis and First Nations communities. The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation are also considering withdrawing their support.

"It's a frustrating position right now for everyone. All of WBEA's funding is tied in with JOSM," said Kyle Harrietha, general manager for the Fort McMurray Métis.

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