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NEWS LOCAL

Facing an uncertain future, WBEA might have to run on emergency savings



By Vincent McDermott

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TODAY FILE PHOTO

The Wood Buffalo Environmental Association might be dipping into emergency funds for a second time this year.

A funding shortfall of \$3.4 million and stalemate between aboriginal, NGO and industry stakeholders over the financial future of the organization has placed the group's future in jeopardy.

According to several stakeholders, the Joint Oil Sands Monitoring program approved a grant of \$13.2 million for WBEA, leaving the shortfall.

To further complicate matters, while the board wants to participate in JOSM, they are divided over how to spend the money they have been granted.

Industry stakeholders do not want to make up the shortfall. They argue the provincial government already promised \$50 million for air monitoring, and their funding shouldn't be needed.

Aboriginal and NGO stakeholders won't approve a budget unless it's the full one they originally wanted. Total and ConocoPhillips were the only energy companies that sided with the aboriginal/NGO block.

"So really, the ball's in the government's court at this point," said Peter Fortna of the Fort McKay Metis.

In an email, WBEA's executive director Kevin Percy said the group unanimously approved using contingency funds to continue short-term monitoring operations. The funds go into effect on April 1 if the matter isn't resolved.

He offered no further comment on the matter.

If the board does not pass a budget at a March 25 meeting, Alberta NDP MLA Rachel Notley says the group will be in danger of closing.

"This government can't announce a budget surplus while sacrificing the safety of our air for so little," Notley said in a release. "This PC government is clearly much too distracted by internal squabbles to do their job, which includes protecting the air, land and water in this province."

Fortna says the group won't necessarily immediately disband, but agreed the group's future will be a bleak one.

"Monitoring won't shut down, the contingency funds will keep the lights on for as long as possible," he said. "If a decision isn't made by April 1, I don't know if we'll fold WBEA, or if it will be absorbed by someone else. Nobody knows what will happen."

Fortna says the group might be absorbed by AEMERA (Alberta Environmental Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Agency). Citing unnamed sources within WBEA, Notley says AEMERA is "nowhere near ready to assume responsibility for the region."

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.

The group already ran on emergency savings in January after industry voted against passing an annual budget in December. Eventually, \$3.7 million to get the group through the first quarter of the year was passed. That funding expires on March 31.

The lack of a budget for the new year is problematic, because WBEA is supposed to provide air monitoring for JOSM. The program, which was formed in February 2012, monitors biodiversity, and quality of air, water and land in the oilsands region, including Cold Lake, Peace River and Wood Buffalo. The program will end in 2015.

McMurray Metis general manager Kyle Harrietha says he hopes either the federal or provincial government will come through with the needed funding on time. However, the fact that WBEA faces an uncertain future isn't a surprise to him.

"Industry only funds WBEA through JOSM, and that means WBEA becomes contractor for conducting air monitoring," he said. "The opinion of aboriginal groups, including the McMurray Metis, is that undermines the independent governance of a multistakeholder organization."

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