

# PETROLEUM HISTORIES PROJECT



## ANNUAL REPORT

ʔehdzo Got'Inę Gots'ę Nákedı –  
Sahtú Renewable Resources Board

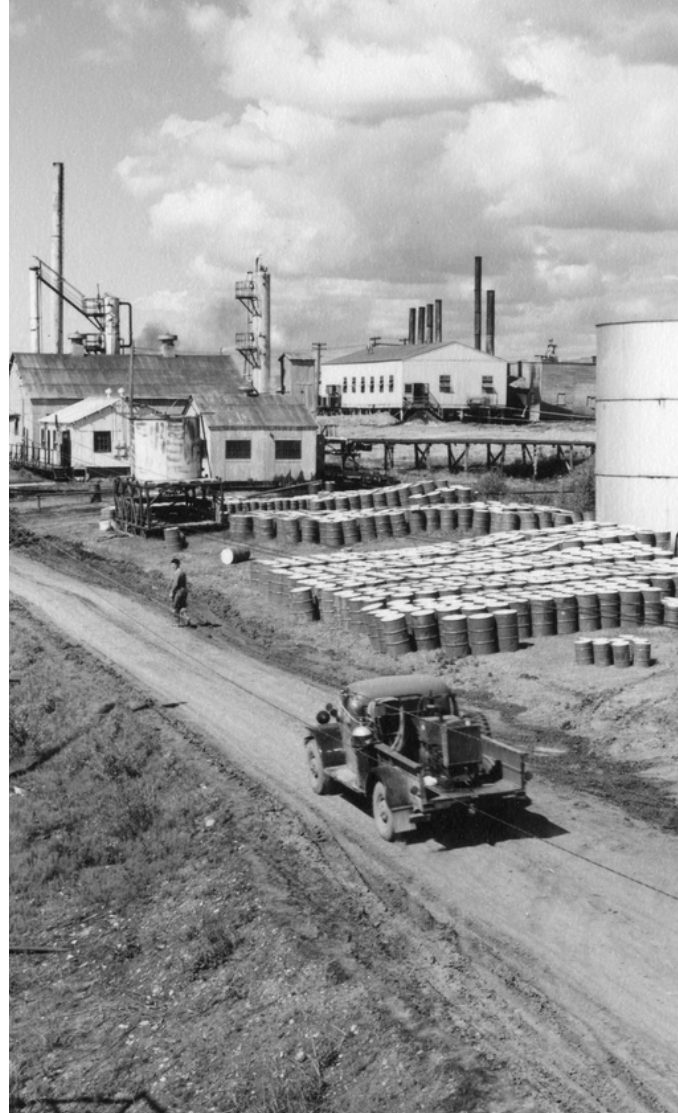
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## BACKGROUND

The possible closure of Imperial Oil's facilities at Norman Wells, after more than a century of operations, raised questions in communities across the Sahtú region about the history of oil extraction at Norman Wells and its impacts on land, water, animals, and Dene and Métis ts'ı́lį (way of life).

To answer these questions, the SRRB and Norman Wells, Tulı́t'a, and Fort Good Hope ʔehdzo Got'ı́neę (RenewableResources Councils), with input from the Nę K'ə Dene Ts'ı́lį Forum, designed "A Century of Petroleum Extraction at Tłegóhı́ (Norman Wells): Indigenous Knowledge for Indigenous Guardianship," or the Petroleum Histories Project.



## PURPOSE

The purpose of this multi-year project is to document the history and impacts of the oil industry at Norman Wells in order to support Sahtú Dene and Métis participation in closure and reclamation of the Norman Wells oilfields and strengthen present and future Indigenous roles in monitoring, stewardship, and decision-making.

## DESCRIPTION

Stories and knowledge gathered through archival research, oral histories, and ground truthing (field work) will be shared through a narrative history, story maps, a website, and short and feature-length films. In addition to expanding local understandings of the history of the Norman Wells oilfields, the knowledge generated through this project will support the development of community conservation plans. These plans, in turn, will provide a range of evidence for regulatory bodies (Sahtú Land and Water Board, Sahtú Land Use Planning Board, Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board, and Mackenzie Environmental Impact Review Board) making decisions about the closure and reclamation of the Norman Wells oilfields.



# UPDATE ON PROJECT ACTIVITIES

## Archival Research

We gathered and processed materials from government records at the NWT Archives and the Imperial Oil collections in the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. These sources are invaluable in understanding the motivations, decisions, and actions of government and industry. We are making special note of materials that document the historical impacts of oil extraction at Norman Wells on the water, fish, land, animals, and Dene and Métis ts'ı́ı́ (way of life).

In 2023-24, we will continue research at the NWT Archives and Glenbow Archives. We will also gather materials from Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa and at two archives in the United States that have records related to the CANOL project (World War II) and Standard Oil, the parent company of Imperial Oil.



## Study Circles

Sources gathered during archival research are being shared with community members through regular study circles. We organized five study circles in 2022-23 on the following topics: staking and early development of the Norman Wells oilfields, supplying oil to Port Radium, the CANOL project, oil production in the 1950s and 1960s, and the development of the town of Norman Wells. During study circles, community members and collaborators collaboratively interpret archival material.

The study circles are critical to documenting Dene and Métis perspectives on and experiences of oil extraction at Tłegóhı́, and also the impacts of the Norman Wells oilfields on land, water, wildlife, and Dene and Métis ts'ı́ı́. The study circles also help to guide the research by identifying: key questions, participants for oral history interviews, and sites for fieldwork and future monitoring.

Study circles will continue in 2023-24. Upcoming topics include the Berger Inquiry, the expansion of the Norman Wells oilfields, including building the islands, the construction of the Norman Wells to Zama pipeline, and the Sahtú Dene and Métis land claim. We will also use the study circles to review project materials, including fieldwork data and the narrative history.





## Groundtruthing (Fieldwork)

During the summer fieldwork at Tłegóhłı, Tułít'a, and Dəocha (Bennett Field), community members and collaborators documented histories of use and contamination, and the current state of these sites using GPS, digital photos, videos, audio recordings, and field notes.

During the winter fieldwork, Nę K'áđıke (guardians) installed wildlife cameras and audio recording units along the pipeline right-of-way from Tułít'a to Tłegóhłı. They also conducted weekly winter track surveys along the pipeline in February and March.

In the coming months, Nę K'áđıke and elders will review and analyze the images and snow tracking information. The results will be presented during a study circle. In February/March 2023, Nę K'áđıke will retrieve the recording equipment. Together with elders, they will review, analyze, and summarize a year of image and audio recordings.

## Norman Wells Gathering

The Petroleum Histories Project hosted its first in-person gathering at the Legion in Norman Wells from March 7 to 9, 2023. Nineteen people attended the gathering. The participants included community members from Norman Wells, Tułít'a, and Fort Good Hope; SRRB staff and contractors; and collaborators from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the Gwich'in Tribal Council's River Journeys team.

The focus of the event was on gathering stories about the history of oil at Norman Wells and documenting community concerns about and observed impacts of exploration and extraction activities on land, water, wildlife, and Dene and Métis ts'ıłı (way of life). The gathering was also an opportunity for members of the research team to share what they had been learning through archival research, study circles, fieldwork, and digital atlas development with community participants.

A detailed report of the event is available at: [www.srrb.nt.ca](http://www.srrb.nt.ca).

## River Journeys Collaboration

We have been working with the Gwich'in Tribal Council's River Journeys team to bring Dene and Métis stories about petroleum development at Norman Wells alive through film. We are currently turning Charlie Barnaby's testimony to the Berger Inquiry about a serious oil spill at Norman Wells in 1943 into a short film.

