



Release Date: April 23, 2007

Call for Oil Sands Moratorium Grows Louder

As the second round of province-wide oil sands consultations draws to a close, the call for a temporary reprieve from new oil sands leases and approvals increases. In its second presentation to the Oil Sands Consultation Panel in Calgary today, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) added its voice to those asking for a moratorium on oil sands activities, for new protected areas in oil sands regions, and for an overarching provincial land and resources management plan that effectively addresses cumulative impacts.

“The development of Alberta’s oil sands has outpaced government policy and planning,” says AWA Conservation Specialist Joyce Hildebrand. “The hare has disappeared over the horizon, leaving the tortoise choking in the dust.”

In this second round of consultations, presenters were asked to respond to the Oil Sands Consultation Committee’s latest document, “Proposed Options for Strategies and Actions.” The Options paper lists more than 180 proposed actions based on the input of Albertans during the first consultation round last fall.

In its first presentation to the panel in September, AWA told the story of McClelland Lake Wetland Complex north of Fort McMurray, which was nominated for legislated protection during the Special Places program and has since been approved for oil sands mining. Today Hildebrand reiterated the urgent need to save the McClelland Lake watershed. “Unless the Fort Hills Project mining plan is amended,” she says, “the spectacular McClelland Lake patterned fen – the core of the Wetland Complex – will be lost to future generations.” AWA is asking for a network of protected areas in oil sands regions before it is too late, including the Oil sands Reach of the Athabasca River and the still relatively pristine portions of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range.

The pace of development in the province is astounding. In the first two months of 2007, energy producers licenced 4,837 wells – that’s 82 wells per day. And energy development is only one of the pressures on an increasingly stressed land base. “Concern about cumulative effects on the landscape has increased dramatically over the last decade,” says AWA Conservation Specialist Nigel Douglas. “Individual project-based Environmental Impact Assessments have fallen far short of dealing with these effects.”

What is needed is an overarching provincial land and resources management plan that effectively addresses cumulative impacts and that is based on scientifically established ecological thresholds. AWA supports the declaration of a moratorium on new oil sands development – no new leases and no new approvals – until those environmental limits have been clearly identified.

“Oil sands development is leaping ahead of the work of initiatives like the Water for Life Strategy and the Land Use Framework,” says Hildebrand. “By the time recommendations are proposed or new policies or legislation put in place, it may well be too late for wilderness and wildlife, not to mention human health and community well-being.”

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