

## AWA Spring Talks Program

Due to health precautions taken with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, AWA's talks program in March and April 2022 took place virtually, via Zoom. This allowed us to reach well beyond the confines of our Calgary-based Cottage School and offices. Once it is safe to gather in person, we plan to continue with a hybrid approach to ensure we continue reaching wider and larger audiences than we have been able to do traditionally.

Our first speaker was Dr. R Kelman (Kel) Wieder, a professor and researcher at Villanova University, who presented on the topic of *Alberta Peatlands – A Valued Resource Under Stress*. AWA is familiar with Dr. Wieder's research through our participation as an environmental representative on the Wetlands Technical Advisory Committee of the Oil Sands Monitoring (OSM) program.

Wieder's talk provided an excellent introduction to the different types of wetlands – marshes, swamps, bogs, and fens – and their distinctiveness. This included learning that peatlands occupy only 3% of our terrestrial surface area but store more than 30% of our terrestrial carbon!

His presentation summarised the current state of human development in Alberta's oilsands region and how development impacts our boreal peatlands. Dr. Wieder's research has focused primarily on how Alberta's boreal peatlands respond to the stresses of oilsands development and recover from wildfires. Unfortunately his work has not continued since 2019 due to both the pandemic and a lack of funding. We are grateful Dr. Wieder was willing to present his important research to AWA members, and we hope to see his work funded again as part of this year's OSM funding cycle.

Dr. Nick Mercer, a self-proclaimed settler-researcher from Dalhousie University's School for Resource and Environmental Studies, presented our second talk, *Advancing Energy Autonomy through Community-Based Research*. Dr. Mercer and his partner Bryn Wood presented remotely from Newfoundland and Labrador with a 3.5-hour time difference from most of our audience here in Alberta.

Dr. Mercer's expertise includes renewable energy policy, the sustainability of off-grid

systems, and participatory approaches to local planning – specifically around energy development. I have a personal connection to Nick, knowing him through various mutual connections from Newfoundland and Labrador, and we thought his experience with energy sovereignty in remote communities would be applicable here in Alberta.

Dr. Mercer discussed his partnership with the NunatuKavut Community Council, a regional Inuit government representing the southern portion of Labrador. The talk provided excellent background on the current state of off-grid electricity in Canada, where 190 predominantly Indigenous communities remain heavily dependent on diesel fuel for heat and power. His presentation highlighted the current global trends towards renewable energy in the fight against climate change, and the startling lack of evidence on how Indigenous Peoples themselves experience and envision energy sustainability in off-grid communities.

For over five years, Nick has participated in a community-based research partnership with the NunatuKavut Community Council to better understand Indigenous needs for sustainable energy development. Their unique approach to participatory planning seeks to centre community rights, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and local needs to decolonize the process of decarbonisation in Canada.

Our third talk featured Dr. Kevin Timoney on his new book *Hidden Scourge: Exposing the Truth About Fossil Fuel Industry Spills* (see Book Review below). Timoney's presentation – in conjunction with his book – discussed

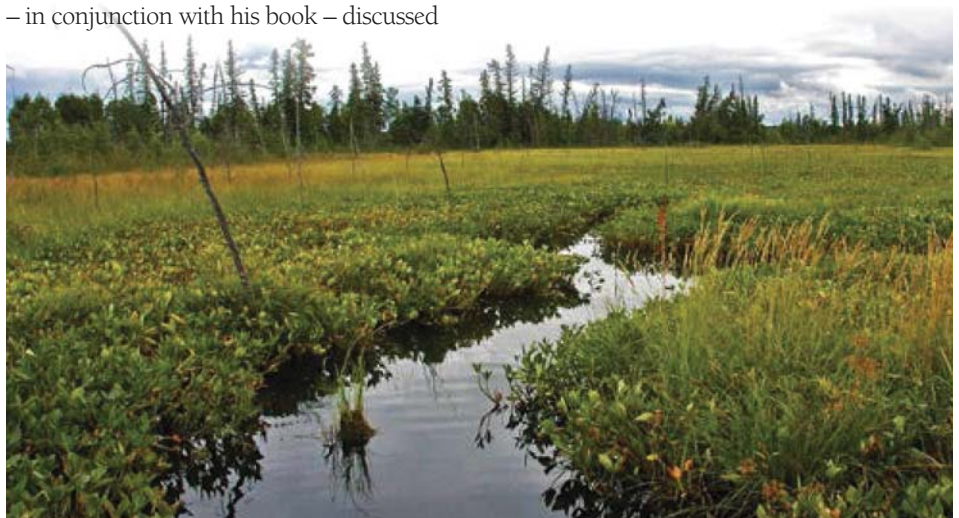
his analysis of more than 100,000 spills by the fossil fuel industry across Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, and North Dakota. His analysis addressed a diverse range of key issues such as misinformation shared by oil and gas corporations, misreported or under-reported data, and 'regulatory capture' of the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) by energy interests.

Regulatory capture is a quasi-legal phenomenon which occurs when a regulatory body or agency that exists to make decisions in the public interest (i.e. AER) is coerced into acting in favour of private interests within the industry it is charged with regulating (i.e. the fossil fuel industry).

Timoney's talk was full of striking visuals that helped to communicate the massive scale of oil and gas infrastructure and spill locations across our province and country. Seeing the geographic extent of the problem helps to contextualize how much work needs to be done if reclamation eventually takes place. With a development footprint of more than 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and an estimated cleanup bill greater than \$260 billion, Timoney believes that we should not allow the creation of new fossil fuel infrastructure until our current problem has been addressed.

We are grateful that Timoney was available to present his research and analysis to our guests that evening, and we hope that anyone who is interested to learn more about his work will seek out a copy of *Hidden Scourge* for themselves.

- Phillip Meintzer



McClelland Lake Wetland Complex in northern Alberta has peat-dominant wetlands vital for carbon storage in the fight against climate change. Photo © AWA