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Oil Sands Multi-stakeholder Panel Hears from the Public

By Joyce Hildebrand

Between September 13 and October 4, Albertans expressed their ideas at seven public consultation meetings about how the province's oil sands should be developed. The Panel members who heard the presentations comprise a subcommittee of the recently formed Oil Sands Multi-stakeholder Committee, which is to use the collected input to develop recommendations on future policy directions by the end of November 2006 and on implementation in the spring of 2007.

AWA member Dr. Ian Urquhart spoke to the Panel in Edmonton. He focused on three areas: the need to reform the royalty structure; the importance of establishing protected areas in portions of the Athabasca Oil Sands area identified by this government as Environmentally Significant Areas – the Athabasca River Reach, the Firebag River, and the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex; and the need for a central government agency to set landscape-level objectives and insure that provincial officials work toward realizing them.

I spoke in Calgary on behalf of AWA, stressing the importance of developing the oil sands only after identifying and legally protecting irreplaceable watersheds in our boreal forests. To illustrate how oil sands development has trumped protection, I told the story of McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, now destined for strip mining despite having been slated for legislated protection in the late 1990s.

The gap between government rhetoric about the importance of watersheds and wetlands and their contradictory action is growing with each new government document on water. One of the many government fact sheets made available to the public at these hearings is entitled "Wetlands Management" and stresses the importance of "managing human activities so both wetlands and people benefit." Despite the grim outlook for the McClelland Lake watershed, which contains one of the most spectacular patterned fens in the world, AWA continues to work for its protection.

Joyce Hildebrand's presentation is on our website under McClelland Lake/Archives.

