

The Selling of Frank Slide

Dear Editor:

Recently, while driving along the southeastern margin of the Frank Slide, I noticed that a portion of the internationally known historic site was for sale. A calloused and unflinching society might view this sale as an opportunity for new landowners to dig for Frank Slide artifacts and victims. “Hey Jake, look at all them smashed skeletons in that hole you just dug.”

As incongruous as a For Sale sign on the Frank Slide might seem, it reminded me that it was only a few years ago, during the hundredth anniversary of the Frank Slide, when society, in the name of progress, dug up more than 500 metres of this same historic landmark in order to install a water line that could have gone elsewhere.

That action sparked letters of outrage that were sent to Alberta newspapers from as far away as the southern United States. The 2003 water line excavation through the Frank Slide, in violation of the province’s own laws (backed by an imposing fine), was apparently sanctioned by the province’s government department. The result: seasonal staff members who worked at the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre were left to administer damage control to a shocked clientele numbering tens of thousands.

Many of this province’s most compelling vistas and no small number of its parks and historic sites are under siege from adjacent development. Not too many years ago the Okotoks Rock (the largest known glacial erratic in the world) commanded instant roadside attention. Today, it’s nearly lost amid surrounding houses, barns, and other outbuildings. The province-wide problem: the land base protecting most heritage landscape vistas is too small to offer visual protection from an encroaching, ever-expanding society.

Thankfully, the Frank Slide has achieved formal designation. Unfortunately, this designation does not include all the lands that are part of



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Morning dawns slowly on the haunting eastern face of southwestern Alberta’s Turtle Mountain and the distant Flathead Range. Hidden within the twilight shadows of this same mountain, encroaching development now threatens the footprint and integrity of a national monument – the 1903 Frank Slide. Here in the Crowsnest River valley, and elsewhere in Alberta, society has failed to create adequate reserves of public land that protect, over time, treasured heritage landscapes and vistas.

the slide’s historic footprint. Even more disturbing, however, is the observation that the designated lands can be torn up and compromised (even if people killed during the 1903 Frank Slide are buried there).

Last year I reported via a letter to the editor that Fortis Alberta had degraded and littered land on the eastern margin of the Frank Slide. The government’s response: a colossal and protracted silence that still lingers over the land. The desecrated land remains a mess, new dirt bike and quad roads course through it, and discarded metal bailing bands left by Fortis Alberta litter the landscape.

My point: the government of Alberta needs to get real. It needs to protect what it says it will protect. It needs functional vertebrae (an honest backbone), functional eyes, and a functional mind. It also needs to demonstrate that it can actually stand up and show its teeth. And once it’s on its feet, exhibiting signs of erect posture, this same government needs to act with logic and reason on its side. It needs to step in to acquire those essential, quintessential parcels of

land – such as the *complete* Frank Slide – that enable society to retain vital, intact links with its cultural and natural landscapes. To do less is to squander Alberta’s priceless heritage and pour management money down the drain.

— **David McIntyre,**
Crowsnest Pass

Rush to Extract Tar Sands Ignores Public Good

Dear Editor:

I attended both rounds of the Oil Sands Multi-stakeholder Committee public hearings in Edmonton, presenting at the first round and submitting a contribution to the second. I’ve also been to Fort McMurray and flown over the tar sands developments, the huge tailings ponds, and the remarkable McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, which is threatened with destruction if the Petro-Canada Fort Hills project goes ahead as approved. I’ve spoken with elders from Fort McKay and others in the area who are alarmed about current and planned development. With the CNRL plant located just northwest of McKay, Syncrude and Suncor located to the south, and the approved Petro-Canada Fort Hills project planned location just northeast of McKay, the people of McKay will be surrounded by toxic odours no matter which way the wind blows! No one should have to live with that!

There are 50 km² of toxic mine tailings ponds in the Fort McMurray area, and the industry still doesn’t have a convincing means of dealing with this ecological disaster waiting to happen. None of the huge affected area has been certified reclaimed. It is acknowledged that some of these tailings ponds are leaking into the Athabasca River and that there are significant levels of fish deformities and abnormalities, likely caused by pollution from the tar sands. Dr. John O’Connor’s concerns about high rates of unusual cancers downstream in the Fort Chip area

were brushed aside by an incomplete epidemiological study. Concerns about high levels of arsenic in moose meat downstream and downwind of the tar sands are also being conveniently ignored.

Meanwhile, it is the average water flow of the Athabasca River that is being used to determine how much water can safely be diverted for current and future tar sands production. It currently takes three to five barrels of water to extract one barrel of bitumen. The amount of water to be used for current and proposed plants is in the trillions of barrels. What will happen during low water flows? Is the industry going to shut down during that time? I doubt it. The Cumulative Effects Management Association has not yet determined or set the full range of ecological limits of production. It is the height of irresponsible development that tar sands expansions are being approved in the face of these and other problems.

The Stelmach government is responsible for setting the rate of expansion of the tar sands, whether



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Tailings ponds north of Fort McMurray

they care to acknowledge this or not. They fund (or don't fund) scientific and baseline studies to determine what the environmental effects are of current and proposed tar sands extraction, they appoint the AEUB officials who (always) approve proposed plants, they set the legislation that allows companies to purchase tar sands leases without public scrutiny, they set a royalty regime that effectively shields tar sands developers from inflation caused by overexpansion of the economy, etc. etc. The "market" is by no means the sole determiner.

I am concerned that the Stelmach Conservatives have bent over

backwards to approve further expansion of the tar sands in the face of a growing body of evidence of serious problems that will only worsen without significant changes. What is the big hurry? Where else is the oil industry going to go? Most other thinking governments in the world have nationalized their oil and gas industry. Where else in the world is the oil industry provided with an effective incentive to increase production costs where the higher their production costs, the longer it will take before full royalty rates are charged? Perhaps the oil industry would prefer to move their operations to Venezuela, like the Chinese National Oil Company has recently chosen to do. Effective governments must increase their ability to intervene in the economy when the environment and public good are not being protected.

— **Rod Olstad**
Edmonton

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