



FANTASYLAND ENGINEERING – TIME TO MAKE WAVES ABOUT McCLELLAND WETLANDS

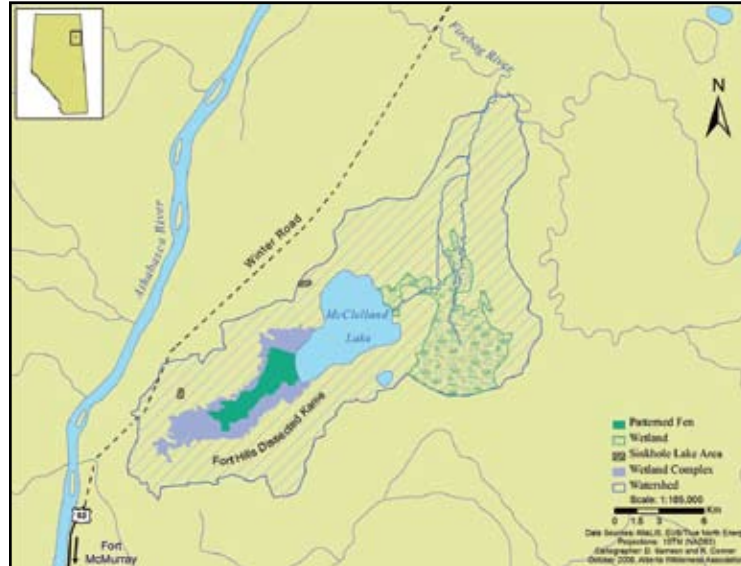
By Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist

McClelland Lake and Wetlands Complex is located 90 km north of Fort McMurray, just east of the Athabasca River. Significant for its patterned fen features, plant biodiversity, and migratory bird habitat in its groundwater-charged peat wetlands, McClelland Wetlands was protected by a 1996 Integrated Resource Plan for the area. However, in 2002 this plan was amended by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development with minimal public consultation or environmental impact review to allow open-pit oil sands mining.

In the past months, activities of two major oil sands leaseholders – Petro-Canada to the west and Synenco to the east – are cause for heightened concern about McClelland Wetlands’ future.

The Fort Hills Oil Sands Project, now owned by Petro-Canada, UTS, and Teck Cominco, was given Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) approval in 2002 to mine the southwestern half of the wetlands, putting the lake and entire northeastward-draining watershed at risk. The proviso to this approval is that a Sustainability Committee is required to develop a management strategy to sustain the unmined eastern portion of the wetland.

An important indication of the strategy that will be proposed has been revealed. In September 2007 Petro-Canada released its 2007 “Closure, Conservation and Reclamation Plan” (CCRP) for the Fort Hills project. This was a requirement of project approval. The CCRP’s mining schedule section confirms that the south mining portion will open first, in 2011, and in the year 2021, mining operations will shift to the north mine area – where the McClelland Lake watershed will be affected. Interestingly, the north mine area is described as that part of the project where costs are highest and oil sands grade is lowest, begging the question why significant boreal peatlands are being



6,738 ha, largely due to the fact that significant portions of non-productive Class 4 and 5 soils will be reclaimed to Class 3 soils.... Class 5 wetland areas will see a decrease of 2,785 ha.” Yet it is precisely the intact groundwater-charged wetlands that provide the

sacrificed for it.

Farther on in the CCRP, a Schedule of Reclaimed Area Extents outlines a fantasized timeline of reclamation activity for the 18,900-ha project. Starting between the years 2011 and 2020, reclamation unfolds efficiently in the alternate universe of this schedule: at no time will there be a net disturbance of more than 6,300 ha, it claims. By the year 2085, 77 years from now – as far from 2007 as was the year 1930 – the schedule concludes with a tidy “zero” net hectares disturbed: all is reclaimed. The note immediately below this Schedule advises: “The accuracy of the estimated disturbance area in the first ten years of bitumen production may be higher than the periods following. Net disturbance calculations through the life of the mine are thus subject to change.” Translated, this schedule is sheer guesswork.

From a wetlands preservation perspective, a noxious principle guiding this reclamation plan is that of “reclaiming land to an equivalent capability.” The CCRP envisages an engineered utopia after the year 2084 where constructed flood plains, constructed wetlands, and four constructed lakes replace the natural watersheds. “The total area that will be productive for forestry... will increase by

prime wildlife habitat of the McClelland watershed today.

While the Fort Hills project poses the greatest threat to the McClelland watershed, AWA is also very concerned about drilling activity underway directly east of McClelland Lake. Synenco Energy Inc. is conducting another winter drilling season. Twenty core holes will be drilled on this lease, adding to the dozens already drilled. To date, drilling results on this eastern adjacent lease have not yielded evidence of high enough quality bitumen samples to proceed with mining plans. Even if this lease is not developed, however, the main road supplying Synenco’s approved Northern Lights mining project cuts through the northern part of the lease. The noise and pollution disturbance from travel to this large mining site and the increased ease of access to sensitive wetlands afforded by the road will increase pressure on the wetlands complex.

Please add your voice of concern about the future of these wetlands during this election season. There is no more likely time for those aspiring to political office to respond to public pressure: now is the time to make waves about McClelland Lake and Wetlands.