



Release Date: February 3, 2012

Beyond Monitoring - Responsible Management Needed for Oilsands Wildlife and Wetlands Impacts

Today, forty five years after the first tar sands mines started, the federal government has finally taken steps to introduce credible monitoring for contaminants and habitat degradation from oilsands development. Alberta Wilderness Association believes that long-overdue monitoring of Alberta's oilsands impacts is a step in the right direction, but monitoring itself will not fix any of the issues which have so bedeviled the industry for the past few years. Monitoring is of no use unless the results of that monitoring are used to inform management decisions, including setting meaningful impact limits.

"The overdue monitoring should not distract from the need to responsibly manage oilsands industry impacts to water, wetlands and wildlife in the fragile boreal ecosystem," says Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. "It is crucial to set disturbance limits on total land, wetlands and threatened species habitat disturbance, so we are not simply monitoring the demise of the boreal ecosystem."

The federal government has legal responsibilities for species at risk and migratory birds, and the Alberta government is already years overdue on promised biodiversity targets. Responsible disturbance limits for land, wetlands and threatened species habitat should be introduced now. Peat wetlands that cover over 40% of the oilsands region are crucial for surface water storage, shallow groundwater recharge, and wildlife habitat; once destroyed, they cannot be replaced. In situ exploration and development has already brought very high levels of disturbance across woodland caribou ranges once considered remote.

Some specific elements of responsible management would include:

- A 'no-net-loss' wetland policy should be introduced for Alberta's public lands;
- Leasing and new industrial development in woodland caribou habitat must stop;
- Biodiversity gems must be protected from tar sands mines and in situ: for example, the Suncor-Total-Teck Fort Hills mine project should not be allowed to mine in the upper watershed of McClelland Lake Wetland Complex;
- Remaining relatively intact southern boreal forest areas on the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range should receive protection compatible with range use, as is the case in Saskatchewan.

For more information:

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