
Toxic Oil Sands waters spilled by Suncor into Athabasca River in 2011 and 2013

On March 26, 2013 a wastewater line froze and burst at Suncor Energy's large tar sands strip mining operations site north of Fort McMurray. The pipe spilled process-affected water into Suncor's Pond C; this pond holds bitumen processing-affected water. Pond C then overflowed into the Athabasca River for 10 hours, from 6 am to 4 pm. Suncor notified the Alberta government at 1 pm about the burst pipe and spill. The accident dumped 350,000 litres of contaminated water, the equivalent of four Olympic-size swimming pools, into the Athabasca River.

Unbeknownst to the public Pond C had had troubles for two years. In a sure sign that the government hoped the issue would go unnoticed, communications staff issued a bulletin at 3:45 pm Thursday March 28, just before the 2013 Easter long weekend. The government announced it was now issuing an enforcement order to impose corrective measures on Suncor Energy, two years after the government began to investigate a March 2011 release of toxic water from the very same pond into the Athabasca.

Pond C's water is supposed to be treated

to a high enough quality to allow limited discharges into the Athabasca River. On March 24, 2011, Suncor concluded that Pond C's water samples taken three days earlier did not meet the allowable limits of "acute lethality toxicity." Why? More than half the rainbow trout used to measure toxicity died after being placed in a March 21 sample of Pond C's "water." Suncor then stopped discharging from Pond C to the River and instead diverted that Pond's waste-water to another tailings pond.

As of the beginning of April 2013, information was not yet publicly available on how much lethally toxic waste water had been released into the River or what the toxic constituents were. The company did report, on April 13, that bioassay results indicated the spill had not had a detrimental effect on aquatic life. Whether this is reassuring to the people of Fort McKay, a First Nations and Metis community downstream of the leak, is not known. From the first reported leak in 2011 until the March 2013 leak, Pond C water failed 39 other fish toxicity tests. The government enforcement order gave Suncor until April 30 to develop a plan to identify and reduce toxicity in Pond C's waters. Details of that plan have not been released to the public.

- Carolyn Campbell