



Release Date: September 20, 2017

Fort Hills Tailings Bird Deaths

Over 120 birds have died from toxic tailings ponds during the start up phase of Suncor's Fort Hills oil sands mine. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) calls for protection of nearby McClelland Lake wetland complex as a migratory bird sanctuary, and for stronger tailings management measures.

"These bird deaths, occurring even before the Fort Hills tar sands mine is fully operational, show a failure to reduce tailings risks to wildlife," says Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist. "They also demonstrate why the outstanding nearby McClelland Lake watershed must remain a haven for migrating birds, and must not be mined by Fort Hills."

The scarecrows and noise systems used today do not stop many migrating birds from landing on Alberta's oil sands tailings ponds. Dr. Cassidy St. Clair's three year monitoring study concluded that 40% of observed day-time birds, or several hundred thousand birds each year, land on these tailings ponds, despite these systems. There is extra risk waterfowl will land on toxic ponds at night or during fog, wind, snow, and freezing temperatures that are a frequent reality during migration seasons in northern Alberta.

AWA has repeatedly warned that these toxic tailings ponds are replacing the natural habitat of migratory birds in the mineable oil sands region. Retaining and protecting the nearby McClelland Lake and its extensive wetlands as significant regional migratory bird habitat is critical for dependent wildlife.

AWA has also repeatedly called for Alberta regulators to require full financial security for oil sands mine clean-up obligations. Only five percent of the funds estimated to reclaim current disturbed oil sands mine sites and tailings are now held by the Alberta government. This creates an unacceptable risk that Alberta citizens will be stuck with cleanup costs. And there is no proven process yet to safely treat tailings ponds, which were 234 km² in area and 1.1 trillion liters' volume at the end of 2014, and keep growing.

For more information:

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