

Oil Sands Tailings Threats Remain Ten Years After Syncrude Runs 'Afoul' of Canadian and Alberta Environmental Laws

April 26, 2018



Ten years after 1600 ducks perished from landing on a Syncrude tailings pond, oil sands mine tailings ponds are larger than ever, and so are their threats to wildlife, waterways and taxpayers. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes it is time for Alberta to reduce significant tailings hazards, and to protect the nearby at-risk McClelland Lake wetland complex as a migratory bird sanctuary.

“We need stronger actions to tackle hazards such as the growing area of tailings ponds, unacceptably high bird landing rates, and the reclamation default risk,” said Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. “We also need greater protection of nearby natural water bodies including the outstanding McClelland Lake and wetlands area.”

In the lawsuit following the bird deaths, the court found that Syncrude failed to exercise due diligence by not following standard industry deterrent practices. Since then, the standard deterrents have been found to commonly fail. A University of Alberta monitoring program funded by Syncrude’s fines revealed

that current bird deterrent systems failed to stop 40% of the total observed birds from landing on oil sands tailings ponds.

Oil sands mines and their tailings ponds are located along the Athabasca River, a major North American migratory flyway. Migratory birds continue to perish at mine sites; for example, in September 2017, over 120 birds died in ponds at Suncor's Fort Hill mine. There are unknown cumulative effects of hundreds of thousands of birds that land on these tailings ponds each year and are able to fly away.

The growing mine sites and tailings ponds areas are replacing the natural habitat of migratory birds in the mineable oil sands region. AWA believes that retaining and protecting the nearby McClelland Lake and its extensive wetlands as significant regional migratory bird habitat is critical for wildlife.



McClelland Lake and wetlands. Credit: Alberta Wilderness Association

There is no proven process yet to safely treat bitumen tailings, which continue to accumulate. At the end of 2014, the ponds were 234 km² in area and 1.1 trillion liters' volume, and keep growing. AWA believes that Alberta regulators must require full upfront financial security for oil sands mine cleanup obligations. Less than five percent of the estimated \$27 billion needed to reclaim current oil sands mine sites and tailings are now held by the Alberta government. This creates an unacceptable risk that means Alberta citizens could be stuck with billions of dollars in cleanup costs.

The 1600 migrating waterfowl died after landing on Syncrude's Aurora mine

lease tailings pond during a storm. The ducks mistook the toxic waters for a safe resting place. Syncrude was found guilty of allowing hazardous substances to contact animals, violating section 155 of Alberta's *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA), and was found guilty of depositing hazardous substances in an area frequented by migratory birds, violating section 5.1 of Canada's *Migratory Birds Convention Act* (MBCA).

For more information:

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