

Water and the Oil Industry

In January 2006, U.S. and Canadian oil executives met for a two-day summit in Houston, Texas, where they made plans for a "fivefold expansion" of oil production in Alberta's tar sands. As it stands, over 1 million barrels of oil are produced in the tar sands every day. This plan would increase the output to 5 million barrels a day – leading to disastrous environmental implications, particularly for Canada's fresh water.

Canada recently replaced Saudi Arabia as the United States' top supplier of oil. We now export 65 per cent of our oil to the U.S. and yet we have to import 55 per cent of the oil that Canada needs from Algeria, Venezuela and Norway. The world's addiction to oil shows no sign of slowing down, and Alberta's tar sands are seen as a limitless source of energy.

The Athabasca River is the main water source for Canada's three giant oil sands mines, the Athabasca Oil Sands Project (controlled by Shell Canada), Suncor Energy Inc. and the Syncrude Canada Ltd. joint-venture, each of which requires huge volumes of heated water to separate the oil from the sand and clay that traps it.

Environment at risk

Oil sands production is destroying the environment at an alarming rate. Alberta is poised to become one of the world's main sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Oil sands development destroys vast tracts of land, clears forests, and consumes 26 per cent of Alberta's groundwater.

Water quantity threatened

The oil extraction and refinement process are incredibly water intensive. **It takes between three and five barrels of water to extract just one barrel of oil**, and of that, only 10 per cent of the water is returned to the watershed.

Meanwhile, recent studies have proven that the combination of rapid, unsustainable development and the effects of climate change may spell disaster for the availability of fresh water in the Prairies.

Water quality threatened

The waste produced from oil sands activities is too toxic to be returned to the hydrological cycle. Ponds containing toxic waste from the oil sands cover a land area equal to the size of England, and threaten the natural habitats of birds, fish and wildlife.

According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, Syncrude's dam, which holds back nearly three decades of wastewater, is the second largest on earth after the Three Gorges Dam in China.

No more expansion

Clearly, the Canadian government needs to conduct a full assessment of the environmental impact of the oil sands – particularly in regard to the rampant use of water.

The Council of Canadians demands a moratorium on new oil sands development until that assessment is done. We also believe that Canada needs to develop strict guidelines to restrict industrial water wastage and pollution.

Renewable energy must play a pivotal role in fuelling Canada's future. It's time to break our ties with oil and gas from environmentally catastrophic sources like the Alberta oil sands.