

## Martha's Monthly May 2008

### The Industrious Beaver is reclaiming the Tar Sands

There are some things on earth that one can see from the International Space Station: the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, the lights of the largest North American cities, and now, a giant beaver dam in northern Alberta. A scientist spending entirely too much time on Google Earth has been credited with finding the largest beaver dam in the world just inside Wood Buffalo Park in Alberta's northeast (see it here: [Beaver Dam!](#)) Those toothy and industrious little symbols of the Canadian get'er-done-attitude have built a nearly 1km long dam, taking a bunch of land in the process.

Martha had to wonder if those beavers were trying to warn migratory ducks of impending doom as the ducks headed back to their summer homes in the same area. Sadly, more than 500 ducks landed on a "lake" which was actually a toxic waste pool and the ducks were soaked by oil. The ducks died after they sank to the bottom of the massive "tailings pond" owned by Syncrude ( see [CBC report](#)). The ducks are just the latest casualties in the world's pursuit of fossil fuels to feed its engines. But the sight of dying, oil soaked ducks has drawn attention to the plight of the land around the oil sands and the slow pace of reclamation efforts.

See, the oilsands, or tar sands if you have lived in Alberta long enough, have a lot of oil but it doesn't come out of the ground the way it did for ol' Jed Clampitt of the Beverly Hillbillies. In the oilsands it takes about 3-4 barrels of water and chemicals to extract just one barrel of oil. What's left is a chemical soup that contaminates the water. The water can't be returned to the river so it is held in tailings ponds until reclamation projects can turn the sludge to something other than sludge. (see: [VBS TV](#))

According to the oil company-financed "Oilsands Discovery Centre" the oilsands are underneath about 140,000 square km of Alberta and just 500 square km of land is currently 'disturbed by oil sands surface mining activity'. ([Oilsands Discovery Centre](#)). According to a report by Pembina Institute and WWF-Canada called [Undermining the Environment: An Oilsands Report Card](#), from January 2008, there are actually 54,000 square km leased for oil sands mining with more leased every two weeks (see [Pembina report](#)). And that same report notes that there are already 50 square km of tailings ponds. Martha wondered just how big that is. Well, in beaver talk that is "DAM Big". If the 1km long beaver dam was visible from space what about 50km of toxic waste? What is worse, the Pembina Institute says the sludge in those ponds "is acutely toxic, containing naphthenic acids, mercury and other toxins that have a significant potential to impact the aquatic ecosystem" (see [Connecting the Dots](#)). That sounds pretty bad. So reclamation projects are top of mind for the oil companies, right? Not so much.

In March 2008 there was a big government [announcement](#) when the FIRST ever land reclamation certificate was issued. Oilsands development has been going for more than 40 years but this was the first time a reclamation project was certified as complete. As the oldest oilsands developer, Suncor has “disturbed 13,093 ha of lands and reclaimed only 949 ha”, according to the Pembina-WWF report. Part of the problem in reclaiming the land is that when companies get approval to begin developing the oil sands they do not have to have any specific targets for reclamation rates and companies set their own schedules for reclamation. That sounds to Martha like asking your teenage son to keep his room clean on his schedule and to his standards. No wonder Suncor has only reclaimed 7% of the land in 40+ years – it had **no targets, no standards, and no expectations**.

This is where the Government of Alberta comes in. Governments, like parents of teenage boys, need to have some expectations and they need to ensure that tasks are completed. But the Government of Alberta does not require oil sands companies to use the best strategies to minimize environmental impacts so some companies are doing things much better than others. The Pembina-WWF report concluded that just making every company do what the leading companies do would dramatically improve the environmental performance of the whole industry. (That is like asking your teenage son to just clean his room as well as your 10 year old does!) Even that would mitigate a lot of environmental damage.

Requiring compliance to industry standards is not all that much to ask. But the Alberta government has only 11 [Alberta Environment](#) inspectors working across the province to ensure that companies comply with the very basic things the company agreed to do in their application. Still, Syncrude’s failure to ensure that 500 ducks were dissuaded from dying on their tailings pond was not discovered by one of those 11 inspectors and it was not made public by the company. Instead, an anonymous tipster ensured Syncrude’s failure was made public.

Ironically, the tip about dying ducks came the same week Deputy Premier Ron Stevens was in Washington lobbying for Alberta’s removal from the list of “dirty oil” sites in a US Congress Bill. (Martha would love to hear that argument some time Minister Stevens!) It seems the Alberta government is more concerned about **promoting** oil companies than in **policing** them. It is time the Alberta people asked their government to do more than ensure oil company profits. We need a government to ensure that there are environmental standards that are met and exceeded. The ducks and the beavers have not been able to write the premier but you can. Copy the following letter to the premier and the Minister of the Environment, Rob Renner. Copy it to the NDP and Liberal Critics and back to us. Consider adding your own thoughts too, the more personal the better. Send to: [premier@gov.ab.ca](mailto:premier@gov.ab.ca), [medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca), [calgary.mountainview@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:calgary.mountainview@assembly.ab.ca), [edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca)

May 8, 2008

Premier Ed Stelmach and Minister Rob Renner  
Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Dear Sirs:

As one of Martha's Monthly, a nonpartisan group concerned about Alberta public policy, I was upset by the recent death of ducks on Syncrude's tailings lakes north of Ft. McMurray. As well as pursuing the company for liability, I believe your government should be ensuring that reclamation of these tailings lakes is improved.

Primarily, I wish to see strong legislation enacted which will set standards and timelines for reclamation and will ensure that companies make better progress than they have so far. I noted your government issued the first ever certificate of reclamation in March of this year and oilsands development is more than 40 years old. I expect much better progress.

I want to be proud of Alberta's environmental record but incidents like the dead ducks on Syncrude's lake of toxic waste make me angry at your government. You must do more to require action from these oil companies.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS.

CC. Dr. David Swann  
Ms. Rachel Notley  
Martha's Monthly