

Tar Sands Exploration in Saskatchewan: The Environmental Impacts

By [Global Research](#)

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ENVIRONMENTALISTS CALL FOR FREEZE ON OIL SANDS EXPLORATION PERMITS

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society has called on the Minister of Environment to undertake a Strategic Regional Environmental Assessment of the watersheds of the Clearwater, Deschermes, Firebag and Richardson Rivers in north western Saskatchewan before any further permits are issued for exploratory drilling or seismic work related to oil sand development.

A major oil sands project would have very serious impacts on water and air quality in northwestern Saskatchewan, while also significantly increasing Saskatchewan's greenhouse gas emissions. It makes sense to assess the capacity of the local and regional environment to sustain such projects before continuing to issue more and more exploration permits. It concerns the Society that no publicly accessible ecological baseline study of the region has been carried out.

While we have been told that an environmental impact assessment will be required if a development proposal is advanced, it is reasonable to assume that the capacity of this landscape to absorb the impact of such development should be carefully examined before the companies are encouraged to invest heavily in exploratory work. Rather than just looking at the impact on a project-by-project basis, a Strategic Regional Environmental Assessment would examine the potential impacts of the whole policy and program to conduct oil sands development in this region.

Even exploratory work, when conducted on a large scale, requires a thorough environmental assessment before being permitted. This has not taken place. The exploratory work now being undertaken in the pristine northwest region can have significant, long-term impacts. It appears inevitable that wildlife habitat is already being disrupted by thousands of kilometres of seismic line-cutting that is criss-crossing an area where regeneration is slow, opening up human access corridors throughout the region. Already hundreds of exploratory wells are being drilled and heavy motorized traffic is being introduced into previously quiet, natural environments. Saskatchewan does not want to repeat Alberta's mistakes when it comes to the destruction of the natural environment from oil sands development. Carefully assessment of the capacity of the natural environment to sustain such development is a good first step to avoiding serious damage. The Society's letter to the Minister is attached.

Contacts: Ann Coxworth, (306)665-1915, Program Coordinator

Attachment: Letter to Minister Heppner

Hon. Nancy Heppner
Minister of Environment
Rm 315 Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina SK S4S 0B3

18 March 2008

Dear Minister,

Re: Oil Sands exploratory work in north western Saskatchewan

The exploratory work currently being undertaken in the Clearwater River region of north western Saskatchewan has the potential to seriously impact the natural ecosystem of this pristine region. It appears likely that wildlife habitat is being disrupted by thousands of kilometers of seismic line-cutting in an environment where regeneration is slow, opening up human access corridors throughout the area. Hundreds of exploratory wells are being drilled and motorized traffic is being introduced into previously quiet, natural environments.

It concerns us that no publicly accessible ecological baseline study has been carried out, and that the cumulative impact of the exploration work has not been publicly reviewed before hundreds of drilling permits have been issued. While we have been assured that an environmental impact assessment will be required if a development proposal is advanced, it is reasonable to assume that the capacity of this landscape to absorb the impact of such development should be examined before companies are encouraged to invest heavily in exploratory work that in itself has the potential to cause serious environmental impact.

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society is thus asking that you immediately launch a Strategic Regional Environmental Assessment of the area that is regarded as potential oil sand country. This would include the watersheds of the Clearwater, Firebag, Richardson and Descharmes Rivers. Further, we recommend that no further permits for exploratory drilling or seismic work be issued until such an Assessment is completed.

Yours truly,

Ann Coxworth
Program Coordinator

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