

Federal & Alberta Governments Announce Environmental Plan for Oil Sands



One of the most contentious environmental issues in Canada these days is environmental management of the oil sands. Production from oil sands operations now are just over 1.5 million barrels per day and projected to double to around 3 million barrels per day by 2020. This production is valued at almost \$60 billion for 2012 and expected to average \$86 billion per year from 2013 to 2020. So clearly the oil sands industry is important to the economies of Alberta and Canada. But oil sands operations can profoundly impact the surrounding environment. Thus, it's essential that they proceed in an environmentally sustainable fashion. On Feb. 3, 2012, the federal and Alberta governments announced their plan for increased environmental monitoring in the oil sands. Here's an overview of the *Joint Canada-Alberta Implementation Plan for Oil Sands Monitoring*.

THE PLAN

Timeline: Some of the monitoring enhancements are already underway and will continue to be phased in over the next three years, with the expectation that the plan will be fully implemented by 2015.

Environmental Components: The plan addresses the following key environmental components:

- Air quality;
- Acid sensitive lakes and accumulated aerial deposition;
- Water quantity/quality;
- Aquatic ecosystem health;
- Wildlife toxicology; and
- Terrestrial biodiversity and habitat disturbance.

Monitoring Improvements: The following indicates how specific aspects of environmental monitoring in the oils sands are expected to improve under the plan:

Approach. Instead of working independently, the federal and provincial governments will work together over the next three years as partners.

Implementation of the environmental monitoring plan will be under the joint direction and management of the two governments to ensure a comprehensive, integrated and joint approach. Specifically, implementation will be co-led by Environment Canada and Alberta Environment and Water's Assistant Deputy Ministers responsible for science and monitoring. They'll work with other government departments responsible for terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, lands, forests and fish habitat.

Peer review. The monitoring program will undergo external expert peer review after year three and at five-year intervals thereafter to ensure that scientific integrity is maintained.

Credibility. The implementation plan was developed by scientists from the two governments. It reflects the *Integrated Environmental Monitoring Plan for the Oil Sands* that was released in July 2011 and was developed in collaboration with over 100 provincial, territorial and academic scientists.

Transparency. The plan includes the development and implementation of an integrated data management system that will enable open and transparent public access to a single source of credible oil sands environmental monitoring data and supporting information. For example, an annual report on the implementation status will be made public. In addition, the data from the monitoring program and the methodology used to produce it will be made public on an ongoing basis.

ANALYSIS

The federal and Alberta governments claim that by the time the oil sands monitoring plan is fully-implemented in 2015:

- There will be more sampling sites and over a larger area;
- The number and types of parameters being sampled will increase;
- The frequency that sampling occurs each year will be significantly increased;
- The methodologies for monitoring for both air and water will be improved; and
- An integrated, open data management program will be created.

The data from the expanded monitoring should improve the understanding of the current status and on-going state of the environment in the oil sands as well as the factors contributing to the environmental impacts. This approach should allow assessment of the effectiveness of mitigation efforts and enable the management of resource development in Alberta while balancing environmental interests.

Who's going to pay for the environmental monitoring? During the first three years, the total cost of the enhanced monitoring will be around \$50 million per year on top of what's already being spent on existing environmental monitoring. The implementation plan indicates that funding for the monitoring program will come primarily from industry. But moving forward, both governments will work with the oil sands industry to develop a sustainable, ongoing funding arrangement to support the monitoring program.