July 2013

Position Brief on oil sands mining in Canada

Background

The oil sands (also called tar sands) in Canada are the second largest petroleum deposit in the world after Saudi Arabia and underlie about 140,000 square kilometres of land in northern Alberta, composed of woodlands and wetlands. Wetlands cover roughly half the landscape of the oil sands region and a vast majority of these wetlands are peatlands.[1]

Oil sands development has profound impacts in terms of carbon losses and other ecological functions of the landscape, especially for peatlands. Other impacts concern water quantity and quality in the Athabasca River and habitat impacts on birds and threatened species such as woodland caribou and whooping cranes. Additional hazards are posed by the growth of toxic tailings ponds.

The production methods to extract and process oil sands result in high carbon emissions – 23% higher than conventional oil[2] – making oil sands-based fuels amongst the most carbon intensive fossil fuels. Better accounting for high-carbon peatlands is likely to increase these emissions even more.

Our Position

Wetlands International considers oil sands development to be inappropriate due to its high carbon intensity and the far-reaching and often irreparable impacts on the land, water and ecosystems, especially wetlands. Continued investments to exploit oil sands not only increases the risk of catastrophic climate change but diverts critical investments that would be better utilised in pursuit of less carbon intensive and more sustainable energy sources.

The reality is that oil sands will continue to be exploited for the foreseeable future. Oil sands operations are currently impacting an area rich in wetland-related ecosystem services, such as biodiversity and carbon storage, that are valuable at both a local and global level. Current laws in Alberta are insufficient to regulate oil sands development in an environmentally responsible manner, and the impact on wetlands is not adequately considered at appropriate levels including local, watershed and flyway. In this context, we consider that there is value in collaborating with the oil sands industry to improve their practices in order to minimise the impacts on wetlands and their functions.

How we work

As a science-based organisation with expertise on wetlands, we work with many different partners, including the oil and gas sector, to improve environmental practices and improve sustainability. In order to reduce negative impacts of oil sands exploitation as much as possible, we collaborate directly with industry, with the aim of achieving sector-wide improvements. We work to limit the impact on wetlands by improving the understanding and consideration of ecosystem functions such as carbon sequestration, water flow, habitats and biodiversity and their values, and by ensuring this is better reflected in planning decisions, including mine development and closure.

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[1] More about peatlands: http://www.wetlands.org/Whatwedo/Savingpeatlands/tabid/837/Default.aspx
[2] https://circabc.europa.eu/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/db806977-6418-44db-a464-20267139b34d/Brandt_Oil_Sands_GHGs_Final.pdf

We promote wetland conservation through the application of wise use principles based on the ecosystem approach.[3] We support the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands hierarchy for operations in wetlands, with a preference for avoiding, otherwise minimising impacts; furthermore to mitigate those impacts and compensate for any resultant impacts.

We work to support:

- A 'net positive impact' policy for avoiding, mitigating and compensating the impacts of operations on biodiversity.

- A risk-based approach to operational planning that includes the cost of lost ecosystem services in its decision-making.

- Opportunities to avoid, minimise, mitigate, compensate and restore impacts through the use of zoning and spatial planning; strategic environment assessments; improved impact assessment standards which include cumulative impacts; ecosystem-based operational standards that monitor the ecological baseline and impacts as a basis for adaptive management.

Our activities

- We raise the awareness of stakeholders, including the regulator (government of Alberta) and First Nations, of the benefits provided by wetlands in order to better compensate for lost ecosystem functions.

- We promote planning approaches (including protected areas for critical habitat) that maintain the integrity of key ecosystem services and avoid compromising irreplaceable or difficult to remediate areas such as those with complex hydrology, high carbon stocks or those important to indigenous livelihoods or species at risk.

- We support better regulations to minimise the impacts of oil sands development, and ensure that ecosystem-based restoration is better reflected in laws, policies and practices.

- We develop better understanding of land use change emissions. A full accounting of greenhouse gas emissions is needed, both from industrial sources and from land-use change, particularly peatlands.

About Wetlands International

Wetlands International is the only global not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the conservation and wise use of wetlands. Our vision is of a world where wetlands are treasured and nurtured for their beauty, the life they support and the resources they provide.

[3] A clear elaboration of this approach and these principles has been developed and adopted by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.