

Brief to the Alberta Oil Sands Consultations
Round II, Peace River
Monday, April 16, 2007

My name is Brenda Brochu, and I am here this evening representing the Peace River Environmental Society. We are very concerned about the pace of oil sands development in this province and particularly in the Peace River area.

Peace River is a small community of less than 7,000 people which does not have the services or infrastructure to support a rapid influx of thousands of people. As well, the kind of development being contemplated would remove a massive amount of clean water from the hydrological cycle, add significantly to greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and cause enormous disturbance of the boreal forest.

A study commissioned by the Town of Peace River states that as many as 25 companies are already active in the oil sands east of Peace River. These public consultations are coming after the fact—after millions of dollars have already been invested. Why is the government selling leases to oil companies behind closed doors? Why is construction going ahead when projects have not yet been given formal approval? Why is it that the Energy and Utilities Board is not allowed to consider the cumulative impact of all projects and land uses when it holds hearings?

We believe that cumulative impact studies are essential to understanding what is really going to happen when all these projects proceed. These studies should include the impact of forestry, agriculture, hunting, fishing and other land uses in the relevant areas. The oil industry should be held to the same standard of environmental stewardship as any other industry, including forestry, which is not now the case. It should also be required to coordinate infrastructure, such as roads, with other land users, and to reclaim all land that has been disturbed by its activity.

It is extremely important to establish baseline data, so that we know what is changing and what is not.

We believe that Alberta needs a province-wide land use plan that sets clear limits on where oil and gas activity can proceed. Some areas need to be set aside as undeveloped so that biodiversity can be preserved and birds and animals have a place to go while other areas are being disturbed. Watersheds and lakes need to be protected from development. Why is it that the forestry industry has to adhere to a higher standard of watershed avoidance than the oil industry? Such anomalies need to be addressed and remedied.

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We believe that a provincial land use plan should also protect prime agricultural land from urban sprawl. We will still need to grow food long after the oil and gas are gone. As well, farmers should have a say about oil and gas development on the land they farm. It is not right that the provincial government should sell leases allowing oil companies to drill as many as a dozen wells on a quarter section of prime farm land, all in the name of economic development. We believe that the agricultural industry in this province is routinely being sacrificed to the oil industry.

For our area, we would like to see a Peace River Regional Land Use Plan developed in consultation with local citizens before any further development is approved. This should be an enforceable plan which protects the environment and allows development only as the necessary infrastructure and services are available.

Citizens of this region are already seeing a significant social impact of oil sands development. Housing vacancy rates in most communities have dropped to less than one per cent. Housing costs are skyrocketing, putting vulnerable people, such as seniors, service sector workers, one-income families, handicapped people and aboriginal people at risk of homelessness.

The Town of Peace River is already short five doctors, and it takes months to get a doctor's appointment. There is no psychiatrist anywhere in the Peace Country, even though mental health problems, especially depression, are expected to increase dramatically with the influx of temporary workers in work camps.

The Peace River RCMP detachment is already one of the busiest in Alberta, and this is expected to get worse. Addiction problems are also expected to worsen, and yet we have no detoxification centre or residential treatment program. We also have no men's hostel. This means that men coming from other parts of the country to look for work will have no place to stay after they have exhausted their savings.

With respect to the physical environment, water is one of our biggest concerns. As we stated during Round I of these consultations, we are philosophically opposed to the removal of water from the hydrological cycle. Alberta has only 2.2 per cent of the fresh water in Canada, and most of southern and central Alberta is already facing a water shortage. As well, we live in an era of global warming, which will not be stopping any time soon even with concerted efforts by government, industry and the general public.

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Studies show that average temperatures in Alberta have risen from 1 to 4 degrees C during the last century. The glaciers that feed our rivers have lost 25 per cent of their mass. Water flow through our major rivers has declined by 40 to 60 per cent. Seventy per cent of the wetlands in southern Alberta have disappeared. As well, there is now a massive drying of the Peace-Athabasca Delta in northeastern Alberta, caused partly by the Bennett Dam on the Peace River and partly by the extraction of water for oil sands projects on the Athabasca River near Fort McMurray.

Continued global warming is expected to bring increased glacial melting, further drying of wetlands and increased drought in the agricultural heartland of Alberta. The rapid increase in population caused by the current oil sands boom is putting further pressure on water supplies. Water is essential to all life on this planet and is irreplaceable. We believe that industry should be asked to use a method of bitumen extraction that does not result in a net loss of water from the hydrological cycle.

We would like to point out that Shell Canada alone is asking for a license to extract up to 36,000 cubic meters a day of fresh water from the Peace River. Extraction is projected to continue for a year at this level, then stabilize at about 10,000 cubic meters a day. The waste water would go to a containment area for recycling by Shell. There would be no return of water to the river system.

A related area of concern is the possible contamination of ground water caused by seismic activity, drilling, pipe line ruptures, etc. An aboriginal elder from the Little Buffalo community about 100 km east of Peace River believes that groundwater in that area has already been contaminated by the oil industry. He says community members used to gather drinking water from nearby streams. However, there is now an oily film on the water, and they have to bring in bottled water from Peace River, he states.

Safeguards must be put in place to ensure that groundwater is not contaminated and thereby lost to human use. As well, we are vehemently opposed to oil activity under Alberta's lakes, such as Marie Lake east of Edmonton. Besides potential contamination of water, such activity could have dramatic negative effects on fish populations.

Another area of concern for us is the production of greenhouse gases and air pollutants by oil sands development in this area. We support the call by numerous environmental groups to have all oil sands projects carbon-neutral by 2020. We also want to see strict controls on air pollutants so that we don't end up with dying lakes and forests as well as an increase in respiratory health problems among people.

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Disturbance of the forest is another important issue. The Pembina Institute estimates that in situ oil production creates 3.2 km. of roads, pipelines and other disturbances for every square kilometer of forest. Many mammals and birds simply won't come near such areas of disturbance. Leases have already been sold that would affect an area the size of Vancouver Island.

We believe that disturbance of the forest needs to be planned in such a way that wildlife always has a quiet place of refuge. Such areas must be large enough to contain a variety of terrain and vegetation, such as old growth forest. As well, the height of above-ground pipelines, such as those used by the oil industry for in situ production, must be regulated to ensure that they do not create a barrier to travel even for large mammals such as moose and deer.

The people of Little Buffalo believe that past oil activity in their area has already led to a dramatic decline in wildlife. While the community used to harvest about 200 moose a year, that has fallen to about 20. That decline has contributed to serious social problems in the community as the traditional way of live vanishes.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that the oil and gas resources of Alberta belong to the people of this province and not to the international oil companies or consumers in the United States. Development of these resources must be managed in a way that is beneficial to the people of this province.

Sudden, explosive growth is not beneficial to the people of this province. It has already caused a housing crisis and a rate of inflation that is far exceeding increases in income for most Albertans. Worse yet, it is creating rampant environment destruction that could threaten the ability of the province to sustain life.

We need to re-evaluate our definition of what is in the public interest in this province. Just because a project generates tax revenue for provincial and local authorities, that does not mean it is in the public interest. Things like clean air, clean water, intact habitat that supports wildlife, uncongested roads, sufficient health care, affordable housing and safe, stable communities—those things are in the public interest.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this brief.

Brenda Brochu
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