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Only two oil sands operations set to meet rules to deal with liquid tailings

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Pembina Institute, & Water Matters (2009). Only two oil sands operations set to meet rules to deal with liquid tailings (media release). Pembina Institute, Calgary, AB; Water Matters Society of Alberta, Canmore, AB.

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Only two oil sands operations set to meet rules to deal with liquid tailings

Volume of toxic tailings will increase to 1.1 trillion litres according to industry plans

Calgary, December 1, 2009 -- A comprehensive review of regulatory documents filed with the Alberta government suggests most oil sands mining operations will not comply with a new provincial law designed to limit increases in tailings, the toxic liquid waste produced by oil sands mining operations.

"Two mines have proposed plans to start cleaning up the legacy of toxic tailings on the landscape," said Simon Dyer of the Pembina Institute. "It is troubling that other companies are not willing to make the same effort and have submitted plans that appear not to meet the directive rules."

The review conducted by the Pembina Institute and Water Matters found that only two oil sands operations reported they would meet the rules to reduce toxic tailings between 2011 and 2013 (the start date for binding rules to capture and start solidifying liquid tailings). The seven remaining operations submitted plans that will not comply with rules for reducing their production of liquid tailings by the first target date in 2011. Some companies submitted plans suggesting they may not meet the rules for tailings management for over 40 years.

Oil sands companies were required to submit tailings management plans by September 30, 2009, in accordance with the newly released Alberta Energy and Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) *Directive 074: Tailings Performance Criteria and Requirements for Oil Sands Mining Schemes*. The ERCB released the directive because of concerns that oil sands companies were not adequately addressing the clean up of tailings waste.

"It is essential that the ERCB rigorously enforce Directive 074 to achieve the kind of environmental performance expected by Albertans, and promised by the ERCB," said Dyer.

As a result of the non-compliant plans submitted by oil sands companies, the cumulative amount of liquid tailings being stored on the landscape north of Fort McMurray is set to increase by about 30 per cent between 2010 and 2020. It will reach a staggering 1.1 billion cubic metres of liquid tailings over the decade. During the same period, the area of the structures containing these liquid tailings are projected to nearly double to 250 square kilometres from the current area of 130 square kilometres.

"We are confident that the ERCB will reject those plans that are not compliant with the requirements of the directive and will use the full range of enforcement tools to ensure this important step in tailings management is upheld," says Joe Obad of Water Matters. "Enforcement tools available to the ERCB include halting oil sands expansions and suspending operations at oil sands mines until compliance is achieved."

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The backgrounder is available for download at <http://www.oilsandswatch.org/pub/1933>

The Pembina Institute/Water Matters assessment report is available for download at <http://www.oilsandswatch.org/pub/1934>

Copies of oil sands company submissions are available from the ERCB:
http://www.ercb.ca/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_309_266_0_43/http%3B/ercbContent/publishedcontent/publish/ercb_home/industry_zone/rules__regulations__requirements/directives/directive074.aspx

Background information on Directive 074 is available from the ERCB:
http://www.ercb.ca/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_323_253_0_43/http%3B/ercbContent/publishedcontent/publish/ercb_home/industry_zone/rules__regulations__requirements/directives/FAQs_074.aspx#q15