

Helping the dirty oilsands scrub behind its ears

We're not as filthy as you think, provincially funded studies say

BY GRAHAM THOMSON, EDMONTON JOURNAL JULY 25, 2009

Imagine your rambunctious child comes running in the back door after a busy day playing outside in our (finally) glorious summer weather but looking like she spent the day in a coal mine.

"You're the dirtiest kid on the block," you blurt out as you start running a bath.

"Betcha I'm not," says your precocious pigpen, pointing outside where some of the neighbouring kids look as grimy as your own.

Does that make you feel any better? Does it make your child any cleaner? Does it make you any less likely to grab the soap and start scrubbing?

All your child can do is squirm and complain as you plop her in the tub.

If, however, she had access to government funding, she could fight back by hiring a couple of consulting firms to investigate whether, as you claim, she is indeed the dirtiest kid on the block.

That's what the Alberta government in effect did this week on behalf of the oilsands.

The Alberta Energy Research Institute (which used to be the Alberta Oil Sands Research and Development Authority) commissioned two reports from different consultants into greenhouse gas emissions from the oilsands. The question: Is Alberta's oilsands industry the dirtiest kid on the energy block?

The answer: The industry is not as dirty as everyone thought it was. Rather than having 40 per cent more emissions than conventional sources of oil production, the producers were maybe 10 per cent dirtier.

The government has been trumpeting the results as if rainbows had suddenly appeared over the massive toxic lakes where the oilsands plants pump enough sludge each day to fill 700 Olympic pools or about six million bathtubs like the one your little angel is grumpily soaking in. Not that you'd want her to go near any of the effluent that comes out of the oilsands. This is the stuff that killed a flock of 1,600 ducks last year.

toxic lakes

The two reports focused on the greenhouse gas emissions and didn't look at the toxic lakes, even though they're hard to miss. You can see them from Earth orbit. Then there's the issue of the huge amount of water the oilsands plants suck out of the Athabasca River every day--enough to supply the city of Calgary.

Then there's the huge amount of ground cover and trees that are disturbed or removed to get at the oilsands. And the studies weren't interested in the wildlife that have seen their habitat destroyed.

But let's get back to the greenhouse gases and how the reports discovered that the oilsands aren't as dirty as everyone thought, compared to other sources of oil. Notice the qualification here. It's not that the oilsands emissions are lower than we thought, but that the emissions from other sources are higher.

"We did this study because it has always been assumed emissions from conventional oil are low," said Eddy Isaacs, head of the Alberta Energy Research Institute. "We needed to make sure we looked at all conventional crudes and not disadvantaged our crude relative to others because of perception."

So, the government-sponsored studies compared the oilsands not only to "sweet" sources such as Saudi Arabia but to dirty sources of oil that are becoming more common as the world scrapes the bottom of the oil barrel looking for new sources. That's where we find, among others, Venezuela, Nigeria and Alberta, which were compared to each other in the reports. One is a dictatorship clothed in a laughable democracy; another is an environmental embarrassment on the world scene; the third is Nigeria. Oh, wait, maybe it's Venezuela.

The bottom line conclusion from the reports: compared to other sources of dirty oil, the oilsands don't look so bad. We're only 10 per cent dirtier, not 40, when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions.

But be careful quoting from these reports. As one of them clearly says under a disclaimer, "This report has not undergone an independent technical review."

In other words, they have not been peer reviewed. They have not been subjected to the poking and prodding of experts in the field. That doesn't mean their findings are wrong, just that you don't know for sure they are right. Having two reports come to similar conclusions is not giving the oilsands two thumbs up.

Pembina begs to differ

In fact, as the Pembina Institute points out, the reports actually reinforce the "dirty oil" image. The oilsands are dirty even compared to countries with notoriously bad environmental standards. Perhaps we're only 10 per cent worse, but we're 10 per cent worse than the absolute worst. Get to the absolute bottom of the barrel and you'll find Alberta.

The Pembina Institute has done its own investigation into the oilsands and in June released a report called *Oil Sands Myths: Clearing the Air*, which included this finding: "Although there is a high degree of variation, the production of synthetic crude oil from oilsands is approximately three times more (greenhouse gas) intensive than Canadian conventional oil production. ... Environment Canada has estimated that, per unit of output, (greenhouse gas) emissions from oilsands mining and upgrading are about five times greater than those from conventional light/medium crude oil production."

A March 2009 report from the U. S. National Energy Technology Laboratory found that diesel fuel from Canadian and Venezuelan oilsands had "well to wheel" (from the well head to the gas tank) emissions 144 per cent higher than from U. S. domestic crude oil.

AU. S. environmental group, the Natural Resources Defense Council, was quick to condemn Alberta's newly released reports.

"Once again, Alberta is focused more on spin and public relations than on identifying problems with the tar sands and putting solutions in place to fix these problems," said Susan Casey-Lefkowitz, who happens to be touring the "tar sands" this weekend. "High greenhouse gas emissions from tar sands oil production is an acknowledged problem. Yet instead of addressing these high emissions, Alberta is defending its dirty oil with half-baked reports."

The Alberta government is desperately trying to improve the image of the oilsands to the American who, under the Obama administration, just might bring in tough environmental regulations against big emitters. Alberta is scrubbing and scrubbing and scrubbing--but this is one baby that just won't clean.

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