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ALBERTA'S OIL SANDS: STRENGTHENING REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

WITH OVER 170 BILLION BARRELS of established bitumen reserves in the ground, and with annual bitumen production projected to increase to more than one billion barrels per year by 2018, the ERCB's regulation of the oil sands will be a crucial part of the legacy left to future generations of Albertans.

Over the last three years, the ERCB has undertaken a number of important changes to our oil sands regulatory structure to ensure that the public interest is protected and oil sands development is environmentally responsible.

The ERCB's Fort McMurray Regional Office increased its staff to 42, with a full range of expertise necessary to regulate effectively, including an inspection group with dedicated field inspectors. Staff processed 2 new scheme applications, 13 amendment applications, 7 annual mine plan applications, and 14 other applications. The increase in staff enabled the ERCB to more than triple the number of inspections and site visits conducted in 2008 at mineable oil sands facilities over the 18 conducted in 2007. Each inspection can take up to one week to complete.

The ERCB also released two important new directives in 2008 that represent major advances in oil sands regulation. First issued in draft form in June 2008, *Directive 074: Tailings Performance Criteria and Requirements for Oil Sands Mining Schemes* was completed after feedback from industry and the public and consultations with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and Alberta Environment.

Directive 074 develops new industry-wide criteria for managing oil sands tailings. It requires operators to:

- prepare annual tailings plans and report on tailings ponds,
- reduce the accumulation of fluid tailings by capturing fines and placing them in a deposit that is trafficable and ready for reclamation, and
- specify dates for construction, use, and closure of fluid tailings ponds deposits and file these dates with the ERCB by September 30, 2009.

In past applications, mineable oils sands operators proposed the conversion of fluid tailings into deposits that would become trafficable and ready for reclamation. While operators have applied fluid tailings reduction technologies, they have not met the commitments set out in their applications. As a result, the inventories of fluid tailings that require long-term containment have grown.

“Tailings” is a term used to describe waste from oil sands extraction processes. This waste is generally composed of water, sands, silt, clay, and small amounts of residual bitumen. Alberta’s inventory of fluid fine tailings that require long-term containment is now 720 million cubic metres.

In December 2008, the ERCB also issued *Directive 073: Requirements for Inspection and Compliance of Oil Sands Mining and Processing Plant Operations in the Oil Sands Mining Area*.

Directive 073 details ERCB regulatory requirements that operators of oil sands mining and processing plant operations must follow, as well as the expectations of ERCB field inspectors. The directive includes an updated manual for

field staff to follow during inspections to ensure that they are conducted in a consistent manner, as well as providing a guide to industry of what operators can expect during and following an inspection. ✦



Buffalo graze on reclaimed land.