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Aboriginal Relations

Advanced Education & Technology

Agriculture and Rural Development

Business and Economy

Oilpatch may hit brake; Market forces could slow down oilsands

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: 24

Section: News

Byline: BY JEREMY LOOME, LEGISLATURE BUREAU

The social, labour and supply pressures of Alberta's boom may force oilsands companies to put the brakes on development themselves, Energy Minister Mel Knight suggested yesterday.

The government has come under steady fire from critics over the last year who say the province's economy is overheated, but Premier Ed Stelmach has repeatedly stated he won't "touch the brakes" on the oilsands.

But addressing the government's public accounts committee yesterday, Knight said market forces may accomplish the same end.

"It's conceivable with the situation that we're faced with that not all of the developments announced would proceed and perhaps some of them will proceed at a future date," he said.

"I think we've responded relatively positively to growth pressures in Fort McMurray and in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo."

Knight was responding to Tory backbencher Jonathan Denis asking whether oilsands growth was proceeding responsibly, after Denis noted housing is so expensive in Fort McMurray now that a portable trailer costs as much as a single-family home in Edmonton or Calgary.

"You already can see that certain players and corporations are repositioning themselves," said Knight.

"Those are the kinds of issues that I'm talking about - these folks understand the deployment of their capital.

"There's a tremendous competition for a couple of the major things you need to build these types of projects; steel comes to mind immediately and that is one limiting factor. You have a situation with steel, you have a situation with skilled labour.

"And you start combining that and take a look at where the best opportunities of capital deployment are, and if we happen to end up as a high-cost area they may look at other opportunities. And the markets and investment will determine that." Waiting for market pressures to kick in has cost a lot of Albertans a lot of money and ruined a lot of lives, said Liberal Leader Kevin Taft, noting those pressures began manifesting themselves in things like tent cities and escalating local prices. "The minister's comments are like calling the fire department after the house has burned down," said Taft.

"The economy is on fire, is overheated and should never have gotten to this point in the first place, and people have been telling this to the government for several years now."

The fact that a Tory backbencher would wonder why trailers are so expensive in Fort McMurray is mind-boggling, said Taft.

"It's like the only people insulated from this information are Tory politicians. Everybody who has tried to buy a house, everybody who has had to hire an employee, anyone who has driven on the highways knows this economy is overheated. And it's overheated because of government policy."

Knight said the government is involved in a \$396- million, three-year program to address some of the social, environmental and economic impacts that have been recommended by the oilsands ministerial strategy committee.

Children and Youth Services

Culture and Community Spirit

Gov't donation-matching policy to aid small volunteer outfits; Program capped at \$25,000 per year in matching grants

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A4

Section: News

Byline: Jason Markusoff

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - The Alberta government's new donation-matching program will mainly benefit smaller not-for-profit agencies and charities.

The program will give the philanthropic groups a maximum \$25,000 in dollar-for-dollar grants that match Albertans' private contributions.

Lindsay Blackett, the province's culture and community spirit minister, announced details of the long-hyped program Wednesday, saying it's meant to help volunteer-driven groups meet the rising costs to provide services, pay staff and afford office rent.

"We can't solve all those problems, but we certainly understand that there's a need to address some of those needs and that's what we're trying to do," Blackett said.

Premier Ed Stelmach said smaller groups will enjoy the greatest benefit because the program is capped at \$25,000 per year in matching grants, or \$50,000 over three years.

"It would be huge," said Irene Fraleigh of the Dogs With Wings Assistance Dog Society.

The Edmonton-based group trains about 10 guide dogs or service dogs for people with disabilities. It raises about \$100,000 annually in private contributions, so this program would be a major boon, Fraleigh said.

"It will give us the ability to train one more dog a year, in a nutshell."

Here are some details of the Community Spirit program, a long-promised idea that stems from Stelmach's 2006 campaign for Tory leadership:

- Virtually any non-profit organization or registered charity is eligible for the program, as long as it raises at least \$1,000 or more from individuals over three years.
- Matching will apply only to individuals' contributions, not to corporate donations or charity through groups like the United Way.
- Groups have few conditions on how they spend government grants under this program, unlike most provincial grants -- as long as use is philanthropic.
- Alberta government will only grant a maximum of \$20 million.
- This is in addition to Alberta's existing charitable tax credits.

Education

Employment and Immigration

Energy

Pricier oilfields inevitable; Shell adopts longer view on new CO2 rules

The Calgary Herald

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: E4

Section: Calgary Business

Source: Bloomberg

Royal Dutch Shell PLC, ExxonMobil Corp. and the rest of the oil industry may face higher costs to exploit Canada's oilsands because of efforts to rein in climate change.

A Canadian mandate to bury carbon dioxide emitted during the process of extracting the oil may add between \$2 and \$13 a barrel to production costs,

according to the Pembina Institute, an Alberta-based environmental group.

Mining crude from the area now costs around \$60 a barrel.

The additional costs are likely to feed through to consumers, leading to higher energy bills and contributing to inflation. Oil prices two days ago reached a record near \$117 a barrel in New York, led by increasing demand from emerging markets, threats to supply in Nigeria and a U.K. refinery strike.

Canada's increasing costs "are important in how the market looks to the world," said Michael Wittner, Societe Generale SA's head of oil research in London.

"One way or another, it will push up prices for Canadian oilsands," he said.

The European Union, Canada, Norway and Australia are among nations setting rules to force industries that use or produce energy to store carbon dioxide underground, instead of venting it into the atmosphere. The accumulation of carbon because of burning fossil fuels is blamed for global warming.

"It is not only about oil prices -- you have to take a long-term view on CO2 regulation, royalties and taxation, and then see how unique your technology is," Jeroen van der Veer, chief executive officer of Shell, told reporters while attending the International Energy Forum in Rome on Wednesday.

"We hope to produce there for decades," he added in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

Saudi Arabian Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi said last month that oil is unlikely to fall below \$60 to \$70 a barrel because alternatives like Canadian oilsands and renewable sources have become viable at those levels.

The rising cost of exploration means \$70 to \$80 a barrel is a "new floor" for prices, Total SA chief executive officer Christophe de Margerie said in Paris on April 10.

De Margerie and al-Naimi are among more than 40 company chiefs and 90 energy ministers attending the energy forum in Rome that started on Wednesday. Issues to be discussed include managing the move toward a low-carbon economy and curbing record energy costs.

Several energy ministers, including Qatar's Abdullah bin Hamad al-Attiyah and the U.K.'s Malcolm Wicks, met Wednesday to discuss carbon capture at the forum in Rome.

Oil producers and consumers have a "common understanding" to collaborate on such projects, al-Attiyah said after the meeting. "Industrialized nations should contribute more than oil producers to the effort because they are the main users of oil."

Environment

Tories slammed over duck debacle

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A3

Section: News

Byline: Archie McLean

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - As the dead duck story ricocheted around the world Wednesday, Premier Ed Stelmach said Alberta is engaged in a David-and-Goliath battle to defend the province against misinformation from environmental groups.

Facing gathering criticism from those groups and opposition parties, Stelmach again touted his government's \$25-million plan over the next three years to improve Alberta's image in light of new ammunition for groups looking to vilify the oilsands.

"This gives us an opportunity to tell not only our American trading partners, but all the world that we mean business when it comes to the rules and regulations that we have in place with respect to the environment and water," Stelmach said. "They obviously have a goal in mind, but it's not going to deter us from pursuing this matter as a province and ensuring that we get this message out to all North Americans."

Environmentalists laughed at the suggestion they are bullying multinational oil companies and a province with an annual budget of more than \$37 billion.

"I'll take it as compliment," said Liz Barratt-Brown of the New York-based Natural Resources Defence Council. "Just think what we could do with \$25 million to get our own message out."

Barratt-Brown said her group will take their message directly to buyers of Alberta's oil if the premier doesn't want to hear it.

"I only see this campaign growing, and in that sense, I guess the premier is right."

NRDC is already pushing airlines not to use unconventional fuels such as those refined from oilsands production.

NRDC, along with ForestEthics, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace and others took out an ad in a Washington newspaper that featured a maple leaf oozing oil. They have called the oilsands the "world's dirtiest oil."

Those same groups were involved in a successful campaign in the 1990s against clearcut logging in BC's old-growth forests. They eventually convinced Home Depot and other major retailers to stop buying clearcut lumber.

For decades now, animal rights groups have protested the Canadian seal hunt and are lobbying the European Union to ban imports of seal products.

Brian Maynard, a vice-president at the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said the industry is aware that such campaigns can hurt the bottom line.

"The industry is hearing more and more concerns, whether that's from Albertans, Canadians or the international community, about the environmental impact of

oilsands development," Maynard said. "We're hearing these concerns loud and clear, and they are increasing in number."

Maynard said the industry needs to listen to those concerns more closely and improve both its environmental practices and communication.

The story of the ducks went international Wednesday with articles on major European newswires and even CNN's website. The headlines included "Ducks trapped in lake of toxic sludge" and "Toxic ponds kill ducks in Canada."

The news came as deputy premier Ron Stevens flew home from Washington, D.C., where he was selling the province's image as an environmental leader and energy powerhouse.

Inside and outside the house, the opposition blasted the government over the issue.

Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said Stelmach's government isn't a victim in the story, but the perpetrator that failed to enforce environmental standards.

"They can't make this go away by buying advertising. They make this go away by solving the problem," Taft said. "On this issue, as well as many other environmental issues, instead of acting they're trying to paper it over."

Taft argued the industry is under threat if it isn't able to clean up its act.

NDP Leader Brian Mason called the duck deaths "a disgrace," and said the government needs to do more conservation and less convincing.

"It would do our international reputation a lot more good if they would simply enforce environmental regulations rather than let this kind of thing happen as they're spending a lot of taxpayers' money trying to convince the world that we're environmentally responsible," Mason said. "Let's be environmentally responsible; that's the first step."

Stelmach accused the opposition of overreacting and sullyng the province's image.

"Thirty years ago, Syncrude pioneered the bird aversion strategy, the research. For 30 years things went well, then one incident. That's what's being used by (the Liberals) to go and try and damage the reputation of the Department of the Environment, and of a company, and also this legislature."

Ducks die a crude death; Loss of hundreds of birds caused by layer of snow around tailings pond, Syncrude says

The Globe and Mail

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A3

Section: National News

Byline: Dawn Walton

Dateline: CALGARY

CALGARY -- Just five mallard ducks have been rescued from an oily tailings pond, while up to 500 birds have sunk to their deaths in the toxic byproduct of Syncrude Canada Ltd.'s oil-sands operation in northern Alberta.

An estimated 400 to 500 ducks landed on the hydrocarbon contaminated lake, which is usually surrounded by noise-making cannons to deter migrating waterfowl, but a late winter storm that dumped 50 centimetres of snow in the area delayed deployment of the devices this spring, the company said.

"It's definitely unusual circumstances, but they're really sad circumstances and we want to do everything we can to help ensure it doesn't happen again,"

Syncrude spokesman Alain Moore said yesterday.

Mr. Moore said rescue operations were stymied by snow, ice and the skittish birds, but 18 cannons are now in place around the several square kilometre lake north of Fort McMurray. The devices will remain through September in accordance with provincial regulations.

Meanwhile, the provincial and federal governments have launched investigations under environmental and migratory bird legislation, which could result in charges and fines of up to \$1-million or prison terms against the world's largest producer of synthetic crude oil.

"Whenever we have an economic activity, we've got to do it in an environmentally friendly way," Federal Environment Minister John Baird said yesterday.

"Something went wrong here. I'm not happy about it and I want to get to the bottom of it. I want to hold those that are responsible to account and we want to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

Just how the ecological tragedy came to light is under dispute, but Syncrude workers say they spotted the goo-covered birds on Monday, contacted the Alberta government, which dispatched wildlife officials to the site.

At some point, a tip was also called in to the government, spawning a flurry of criticism from opposition parties about adequate monitoring and the potential for cover-ups.

"I think the world expects more than anonymous tips to protect the oil sands," Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said during Question Period in the legislature.

Ted Morton, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, said the notification process will be part of the investigation.

"We will get to the bottom of this. We'll get the facts, and if there is negligence, negligent parties will pay," he said.

The timing couldn't be worse for the Alberta government, which wrapped up a mission to Washington yesterday aimed at promoting the province as having environmentally responsible policies in the oil sands.

At the same time, the province faced a renewed barrage of questions about its plan to spend \$25-million on a public-relations campaign designed partly to dispel myths about the oil sands.

"Twenty-five million dollars is well spent in ensuring that we protect the integrity of this province," Premier Ed Stelmach told the legislature.

The incident is also a blow to the image of Syncrude, which produces about 350,000 barrels per day from the oil sands, but has never had an incident like this..

Ducks look real bad; Not only are majority dead but deputy premier trying to sell oilsands to U.S.

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: 2

Section: News

Byline: BY JEREMY LOOME, LEGISLATURE BUREAU

Premier Ed Stelmach downplayed the impact of up to 500 dead birds in the toxic sludge of a Syncrude tailings pond as critics called for stricter oilsands controls yesterday.

Only three ducks were expected to survive after a flock of waterfowl landed Monday morning on the partially frozen pond filled with oilsands waste near Fort McMurray.

Facing a barrage of opposition questions over the incident that has garnered international attention, Stelmach said the lack of past animal health complaints demonstrates the company's cannon-based noise deterrence system works.

"We expect companies to live up to the licences we permit and if they don't there are consequences," said Stelmach. "Thirty years ago, Syncrude pioneered the bird diversion strategy, the research. And for 30 years, things went well. One year, we have one incident and this is what's being used by (the Alberta Liberal party) to not only damage the reputation of the department of the environment, but of a company and also this legislature."

Good intentions notwithstanding, the incident could not have come at a worse time. Deputy Premier Ron Stevens is currently in Washington, D.C., lobbying on Alberta's behalf for exemptions to a law that might ban U.S. federal agencies from buying the province's synthetic crude. He's already received negative attention from environmental groups, and the province had just announced it is spending \$25 million in tax dollars on a publicity campaign to show the Stelmach government is a good environmental steward.

Opposition politicians suggested that stewardship system is over-reliant on companies reporting problems, and the bird incident was actually reported by a tipster. If the self-reporting part of the system isn't working, Albertans should not be confident that this is the first incident, said Liberal Leader Kevin Taft.

"The fact that we had to rely on a whistleblower to tell us the truth in this situation puts all of the historical information into doubt," said Taft. "These ponds

are pools of toxic water so vast that it takes the largest earthen dams in the world to hold them in place."

NDP Leader Brian Mason said Alberta needs to step up its environmental policing. "During the 2007 (budget) estimates debate, the minister of the environment said, and I quote, 'The best way to ensure compliance with legislation is not by going out and hiring more policemen.' Today, we see the folly of that approach: 500 migratory birds stuck in the goo of a Syncrude tailings pond."

Environment Minister Rob Renner said the government must, to some extent, rely on tipsters but clarified that the government takes other steps and the system is not entirely self-policed.

"There is in place a series of regulations on the operation of those tailing ponds that have a number of requirements, one of which is that bird deterrents be in place and working at all times," said Renner. "That is what is under investigation."

The government has said Syncrude could face fines of up to \$1 million if it's demonstrated it did not follow regulations.

Duck deaths raise ire; But Stelmach says call for stricter oilsands rules scaremongering

The Calgary Sun

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: 4

Section: News

Byline: BY JEREMY LOOME, LEGISLATURE BUREAU

Dateline: EDMONTON

Politicians calling for stricter oilsands controls in the wake of the deaths of up to 500 birds at a Syncrude tailings pond are just scaremongering, Premier Ed Stelmach suggested yesterday.

Facing a barrage of Opposition questions about the incident at the tailings pond near Fort McMurray, Stelmach said the lack of past animal health complaints demonstrates the company's cannon-based noise deterrence system works.

"We expect companies to live up to the licences we permit -- and if they don't, there are consequences," said Stelmach. "Thirty years ago, Syncrude pioneered the bird diversion strategy, the research. And for 30 years, things went well. One year, we have one incident and this is what's being used by (the Alberta Liberal Party) to not only damage the reputation of the Department of the Environment, but of a company and also this legislature."

The incident could not have come at a worse time. Deputy Premier Ron Stevens is in Washington, D.C., lobbying on for exemptions to a law that might ban U.S. federal agencies from buying the province's synthetic crude.

He's already received negative attention from environmental groups, and the province has just announced it is spending \$25 million in tax dollars on a publicity campaign to show the Stelmach government is a good environmental steward. Opposition politicians suggested that stewardship system is over-reliant on companies reporting problems, and the bird incident -- which was first noticed Monday -- was actually reported by a tipster.

If the self-reporting part of the system isn't working, Albertans shouldn't be think this is the first incident, said Liberal Leader Kevin Taft.

"The fact that we had to rely on a whistleblower to tell us the truth in this situation puts all of the historical information into doubt," said Taft.

"These ponds are pools of toxic water so vast that it takes the largest earthen dams in the world to hold them in place. They are literally on the edge of the Athabasca River and they grow by millions of litres a day."

NDP Leader Brian Mason said Alberta needs to step up its environmental policing.

"During the 2007 (budget) estimates debate, the minister of the environment said ... 'the best way to ensure compliance with legislation is not by going out and hiring more policemen', " he said.

"Today, we see the folly of that approach: 500 migratory birds stuck in the goo of a Syncrude tailing pond."

Liberal critic David Swann accused the government of doing little to nothing to stem the growth of tailing ponds, which he referred to as a "toxic soup" of arsenic and heavy metals.

Syncrude May Face \$1M Fine For 500 Duck Fatalities

National Post

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A2

Section: News

Byline: Hanneke Brooymans And Jim Farrell

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: Canwest News Service

EDMONTON - Of the 500 ducks that landed in a toxic waste pond at a northern Alberta mine, only five are worth trying to save, an oilsands company said yesterday.

The grim news came as questions arose over how quickly Syncrude Canada reported that the waterfowl had landed in the pond at the company's Aurora mine site, 485 kilometres northeast of Edmonton.

Tailings ponds hold a mix of clay, water, sand, hydrocarbons and heavy metals that is left over after water washes oil out of sand in the oilsands extraction process.

The ducks' demise is a public relations problem for the Alberta government, which has been trying to convince domestic and international critics that production in the province's oilsands is environmentally friendly.

The province may charge Syncrude with not immediately reporting the incident. That's in addition to charges the company could face for failing to keep the migratory birds off the ponds in the first place, which alone carries a potential \$1-million maximum fine.

Syncrude says it started deploying propane-fired cannons -- which make loud bangs to keep birds away from tailings ponds -- at various sites a week ago. However, the company says it had not yet been able to put anything out on the Aurora tailings pond, partly because of a recent spring snowstorm in the region. Syncrude airlifted three wet and oily ducks to Edmonton yesterday to receive a proper cleaning and care that may save their lives.

The three female ducks -- two mallards and one bufflehead -- are now being cared for by the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton.

"They were washed and got an initial cleaning before we received them," said Kim Blomme, the founder of the society. "But they are still wet and greasy."

The outrage over the ducks reached all the way to the office of Premier Ed Stelmach, who said he wants to find out if Syncrude was following the guidelines set out in its licence.

"As the government of Alberta, we mean business," he said.

"So if we issue a licence and there are certain conditions under that licence, the company has to make sure that they conform."

News of the dying ducks has drawn international media attention. The story made CNN and European newspaper Web sites this week, just as Alberta deputy premier Ron Stevens was visiting Washington to persuade U.S. policy-makers the oilsands are clean energy producers.

Mr. Stelmach bemoaned to reporters that environmental groups, already campaigning against Mr. Stevens's visit, will be working to make the ducks story a major issue continent-wide.

He said the \$25-million in the recent provincial budget for promoting Alberta and oilsands as environmentally friendly is paltry compared to the war chests and clout of environmental groups, which his "branding" campaign is meant to counter.

500 ducks enter toxic pond and only 5 come out

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A1 / FRONT

Section: News

Byline: Hanneke Brooymans and Jim Farrell

Dateline: FORT MCMURRAY

Source: The Edmonton Journal; With files from the Calgary Herald

FORT MCMURRAY - Syncrude has vowed to take measures to avoid a repeat of a problem that made international headlines this week when an estimated 500 migrating ducks died after landing on one of its tailings ponds.

The company found only five ducks worth trying to save, and sent them to a wildlife rehabilitation centre in Edmonton. Three oil-soaked birds -- two mallards and a small bufflehead diving duck -- arrived by plane on Wednesday for the cleaning, medical treatment and weeks-long recovery period that could save their lives.

Syncrude was criticized Wednesday by Fort McMurray environmentalist Ruth Kleinbub for failing to have noise makers on the Aurora tailings pond in time to scare away migrating waterfowl.

The pond is about 75 kilometres north of Fort McMurray. Water is used to wash oil out of the sand, and the pond contains the leftovers of that process, called tailings, including sand, water, heavy metals and residual oil.

The birds that landed on the pond were quickly coated.

The company said most probably sank when they became covered in oil.

Kleinbub said the company should have had its deterrents, such as sonic cannons, in the field much earlier.

"The birds were here the first week of April," said Kleinbub, a member of the Fort McMurray Field Naturalists and a director of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists. A birdwatcher, she said she saw waterfowl returning to the area three weeks ago. "I think it's absolutely ridiculous that they weren't ready."

Syncrude says it started deploying sonic cannons about a week ago, but had not been able to put anything out on the pond before the late spring storm.

Kleinbub said there's no reason to stagger the deployment of the cannons.

"That's something we're going to look into," said Steven Gaudet, Syncrude's manager of environmental services and land reclamation. "The deployment was fairly rapid, but not rapid enough. We regret that, and that's something we'll have a look at as we study the event."

Gaudet said a company operator first discovered the ducks around 9:30 a.m. Monday. The report was called in to the company's environmental office, then relayed to the province's fish and wildlife office by noon. The province had already received an anonymous tip about the ducks by that time and had left a message with Syncrude, Gaudet said.

The company was supposed to call Alberta Environment immediately.

When asked why Alberta Environment wasn't called right away, Gaudet said the company called the regulators it thought were best suited to handle the situation.

As for the timing of that call, Gaudet said: "Our initial activity is to get out into the field to witness and assess, and then to get to Alberta Environment or Fish and Wildlife or Sustainable Resource Development immediately to report it. I

think, in this instance, a couple of hours to verify the numbers, to assess the situation, to get my environmental team on the ground was well worth it. I'd hate to be reporting in an unsubstantiated or a minor event that needs a major response.

"This was just an hour or two to assess the situation and phone in, and I think that was a pretty good response."

Sustainable Resource Development spokesman Dave Ealey said the government first learned of the incident from an anonymous tipster who phoned its Fort McMurray office just before 11 a.m. Monday.

Ealey said the department then phoned Syncrude.

"We were the ones who notified them that there might be an issue," Ealey said, adding that as far as he knows, the company wasn't aware of the problem until then.

"They did, in fact, call us back, just letting us know that they got the message and that they were following up on it around 12:40 (p.m.)."

Ealey said staff with Sustainable Resource Development and Alberta Environment travelled from Fort McMurray to the site and were there with Syncrude workers by 6 p.m. Monday.

"It's a long drive out there from Fort McMurray, and it's a pretty rough road," he said.

A flyover of the tailings pond Wednesday morning revealed little obvious activity. No boat was spotted. The company said it was now at the stage where workers were walking around the pond looking for ducks on the shoreline.

Given the weather conditions, Syncrude should have anticipated potential problems with waterfowl, said a University of Alberta biologist.

The unusual cold weather last week was bad timing for the large numbers of migrating waterfowl that annually pass through the area on their way to the Peace-Athabasca delta, said Colleen Cassidy St. Clair, an associate professor of behavioural ecology and conservation biology.

"Those tailings ponds with the warm effluent in them become extremely attractive to them as rest sites."

Oilsands operators have known for years that tailings ponds are attractive to waterfowl. So they should have expected the birds to show up after the late storm, she said.

"It would be a bit surprising if there wasn't also an extra effort to get all their equipment operational."

If there was one pond that didn't have noisemakers set up yet, it would be expected that the ducks be more attracted to that site, she said.

The ducks now being treated in Edmonton are at risk from a number of factors that may kill them in the coming days and weeks, said Kim Bloome, founder of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton.

"Based on what is in that retaining pond, toxic chemicals may erode their GI tract or shut down their kidneys," said Bloome. "The stress of handling may also kill them."

In mid-afternoon, three ducks were each taken out of an incubator for 15 or 20 minutes at the society's South Edmonton facility for medical examination and another cleaning. Using Q-tips and Dawn dish soap, the society's director of wildlife services carefully scrubbed the sticky tar from eyes, from around beaks and from inside the birds' beaks. Kristin Arnot also plucked a feather from the breast of each bird and put them in sealed bags.

"We need to keep a paper trail in case any charges are laid," Arnot said. Blood samples were taken from each bird. Their temperatures were taken to determine if they were suffering from hypothermia because of damage to the waterproofing of their feathers.

To rehydrate the birds, tubes were shoved down their throats and an electrolyte solution was flushed into their stomachs.

The society has experienced the aftermath of other waterfowl oiling incidents in the past, but nothing of this scale, Bloome said.

"That's because we are in a peak migration season. The major lakes are not thawed yet. The birds were flying over, looking for anything that looks like open water."

The open and inviting body of water was particularly dangerous to the small diving ducks, Bloome said.

"Diving ducks, like the bufflehead duck we have here, would have gone down in the water and ingested some of the contaminant."

Once they were down on the water, the bufflehead ducks' instinct was to stay, Bloome said.

"Mallards have the ability to get out of the water because they are comfortable on land.

"These diving ducks spend their whole life on the water except when migrating, so getting out of the water would have been unnatural."

BIRD-CLEANING

Watch a bird undergoing a cleaning at the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society facility. Go to Videos at edmontonjournal.com

TAILINGS PONDS

- What: Massive reservoirs containing the byproducts of oilsands extraction -- a toxic slurry of water, clay, sand, residual bitumen and chemicals.

- How much: There are currently 13 tailings ponds at oilsands mines north of Fort McMurray. The pools of oilsands waste products cover a total of 50 square kilometres, according to the Pembina Institute environment think-tank. The National Energy Board has predicted that by 2020, Syncrude and Suncor alone will have ponds holding more than one billion cubic metres of the sludge.

- What's dangerous: Among the most toxic chemicals in tailings ponds are mercury and naphthenic acids. One study last year with Syncrude tailings water and fish showed increased cases of deformities.
- Keep birds away: In spring, migrating ducks are particularly drawn to the ponds, which are kept warm by the tailings while other water bodies nearby are often frozen over. The government requires firms to take measures to keep birds away, and mines usually do so with propane cannon blasts. A snowstorm prevented Syncrude from setting up the noisemakers at its Aurora mine tailings pond, the company said.
- Trying to fix it: The contaminants can separate and settle to the pond bottom on their own, but it would take decades or centuries. Oilsands firms and government have long tried to remediate or mitigate tailings. Some demonstrated methods include capping them with fresh water to produce a lake, or using gypsum to separate the water and sediment, or large separating machines known as thickeners. But no treatment is ready for widescale use.
- Past mishap: In 1982, a Suncor pond leaked oil, grease and chemicals into the Athabasa River after a dike leaked. The company was fined \$38,000.

Two surviving mallards perky - 'most have sunk'

The Edmonton Sun

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: 2

Section: News

Byline: BY SARAH LIGON, SPECIAL TO SUN MEDIA

The prognosis is grim for one of three ducks pulled from a Syncrude tailings pond. Two of the surviving birds are mallards and are "looking perky," said Kim Blomme, founder of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Association of Edmonton, which is organizing efforts to care for the birds.

"The other duck (a bufflehead) looks like it's not doing that great, very quiet, stressed-looking, closing its eyes a lot, which is not good."

Only five of the estimated 500 birds that landed in the tailings pond near Fort McMurray on Monday have been recovered alive.

Two later died and the remaining three were sent to Edmonton for emergency medical treatment.

"They were wet and cold," Blomme said. "And so the veterinarians put them in an incubator to warm them up."

She explained that mallards are dabbling birds and remain at the water's surface, while bufflehead birds are diving birds, which swim deep beneath the surface of the water, becoming coated with more oil.

Most of the birds that landed on the Syncrude tailings pond were diving birds.

"Most have sunk. They were oily, and the oil made them sink," said Cheryl Robb, an Alberta Environment spokesman.

"However, recovery efforts are still underway and we will stay on site as long as it takes."

Environmental assessments dropped for power lines; Minister can still order studies at his discretion

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A2

Section: News

Byline: Geoffrey Scotton

Dateline: CALGARY

Source: Calgary Herald; Canwest News Service

CALGARY - One day after environmental worries about energy development were brought into sharp relief by the death of hundreds of birds at an oilsands plant, the Alberta government has chosen to eliminate any requirement that massive power-line projects be examined for their environmental impact.

"Our experience has shown Albertans' concerns over transmission lines are related to routing, land management and human health -- all of which can be addressed through the Alberta Utilities Commission process," Environment Minister Rob Renner said in a statement announcing the change.

The announcement of the change, made by cabinet through an Order in Council, was issued after the department had closed for the day.

The decision to eliminate the sometimes lengthy and expensive environmental impact assessments comes as the province expects a minimum of \$10 billion in generating projects and an associated \$5 billion in transmission projects to be built over the next decade.

Provincial officials have warned that Albertans could face rotating blackouts or load curtailments if important transmission projects are not completed on an urgent basis.

Renner argued the change will allow the province and regulators to focus environmental expenditures and scrutiny elsewhere, where it is more effective.

"As a result of these changes, resources can be better dedicated to other environmental issues," Renner said.

He noted the environment minister will still have the power to order an environmental impact assessment.

Previously, the assessments were required for projects involving transmission lines of 500 kilovolts or more, while those below 130 kilovolts were exempt and those in between were at the discretion of the department.

Under the changes, discretion will be in the hands of the minister.

Alberta Environment spokeswoman Kim Capstick said the environmental impact of most transmission projects is generally straightforward.

"When it comes to transmission lines, the environmental questions are pretty clear. The environmental impact is poles in the ground," said Capstick, who noted assessments can be onerous.

"EIAs are up to two years of review and analysis by our staff."

Although many experts agree transmission capacity is badly needed in Alberta, transmission projects in some areas have faced vehement opposition.

The last major transmission proposal in Alberta, a 500-kilovolt, \$600-million project between the Edmonton and Calgary areas, was scrapped after the then-regulator -- the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board -- admitted it had spied on landowners opposed to the project.

Since then, the province has broken up the EUB to create the Alberta Utilities Commission, which oversees electricity, and the Energy Resources Conservation Board, which regulates oil and gas development.

The north-south project is still on the drawing board and there is an expectation it will be reintroduced in an updated form this summer.

Renner's announcement said the AUC will continue to regulate transmission lines and provide opportunity for public input on proposed projects.

"Health and safety and routing issues will continue to be addressed through the commission," said the statement.

The Alberta Electric System Operator has forecast that the province will require an additional 5,000 megawatts of generation by 2017, more than the entire existing capacity in Saskatchewan.

Over the next two decades, the AESO believes Alberta will require an additional 11,500 megawatts of generating capacity, much of which will require new transmission lines.

Alberta today has a total generating capacity of about 12,000 MW and a peak load of about 9,700 MW.

Finance and Enterprise (including Pensions/Insurance)

Province leaving billions on table: AG

The Calgary Herald

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A4

Section: News

Byline: Jason Fekete

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: Calgary Herald

The Alberta government has failed every year since 2001 to collect even the bottom range of its resource royalty target -- costing the provincial treasury billions of dollars, the auditor general noted Wednesday.

The Tory government's "optimal" royalty take each year is between 20 to 25 per cent of the oil and gas industry's net operating revenue, but the province hasn't surpassed the bottom of that range since 2001, Auditor General Fred Dunn told the legislature's public accounts committee.

"If for many years you're below the bottom of the range, then you can say the policy is not achieving the objective of optimization," Dunn told the Herald following the meeting.

Provincial royalty collections are calculated by the Energy Department on a three-year rolling average, which has totalled 19 per cent over the last few years (2005 fiscal year is most recent available) -- below the 20-25 per cent range. And as commodity prices have escalated in recent years, so has the oil and gas industry's profits, while the outdated price sensitivities in the royalty system (which are about to be updated) means the government's royalty share is dropping even further.

"The greater the measure above the (price) caps, the more your profits grow," he added. "It has gone much more to industry than to the province."

Dunn referred to his report from October, which noted that royalties could increase "by an absolute minimum" of \$1 billion to \$2 billion annually on natural gas alone under the commodity prices seen in recent years. Factor in conventional oil and the oilsands and that number could be billions more.

"The fact that the government did not meet its own targets has shortchanged Albertans -- the owners of the resource -- billions of dollars," argued Liberal MLA Hugh MacDonald, who's hounded the government for years on royalty collection. The accusations were denounced by Energy Minister Mel Knight. He maintained government wasn't shortchanged on royalties.

"There is no missing billion dollars," Knight said. "We followed the policy and collected the economic rent that was due to Albertans."

Last fall's report by the government-appointed royalty panel delivered similar conclusions as Dunn, arguing government hadn't been receiving its fair share of royalties "for quite some time" and should have boosted the province's take by \$2 billion a year.

The Stelmach government has since implemented a new royalty framework -- set to take effect in January.

Health & Wellness

Premier rejects hospital bailout

The Calgary Herald

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: B1 / FRONT

Section: City & Region

Byline: Michelle Lang and Jason Fekete

Source: Calgary Herald

Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach said Wednesday that hallway medicine in Calgary hospitals is unacceptable, but suggested the problem isn't unique and would not commit more cash to open beds at two new medical facilities.

A day after Calgary Health Region said it needs \$25 million from government to fully operate a hospital expansion and a new downtown medical centre, Stelmach said health care already received a large increase in last week's provincial budget. The comments come after the CHR said Tuesday that demand for medical care in the booming city has outgrown the supply, adding that 137 patients are now being housed in hospital hallways and lounges on a daily basis.

"It's not acceptable. It's not acceptable. But . . . you'll find the same issues in B.C., in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and Ontario," said Stelmach, speaking to reporters in Edmonton.

"We cannot continue double-digit increases in the overall budget" he said.

But Jack Davis, chief executive of the CHR, said his health authority should receive at least the same annual budget as the Edmonton-based Capital Health Region. In the past four to five years, Davis said Edmonton has pocketed about \$500 million more than the CHR.

"If we had received the same level of funding, there would be no deficit, we'd have enough to open our new facilities and invest in some critical medical equipment," Davis said in an interview.

"We're hopeful government will look at that and respond favourably."

The debate follows a CHR board meeting Tuesday when the health authority revealed its deficit has grown to \$97.5 million for the past fiscal year. Officials with the region say Calgary hospitals are facing unprecedented demand from a growing and aging population, sending costs such as overtime skyrocketing. The region also said it would need the \$25 million, in addition to its regular budget, to fully open a 100-bed expansion of Rockyview Hospital as well as the new Sheldon Chumir Health Centre.

Both projects are designed to relieve pressure on Calgary's three adult hospitals. The CHR said if the government doesn't provide additional cash, it will be able to only partially open the new facilities.

The Alberta Liberals said Calgary's health system is still playing catch-up to cutbacks from a decade earlier and blamed the current overcrowding on the provincial government.

"I've worked in several Third World countries where (hallway medicine) was almost the norm," said Dr. David Swann, a Calgary Liberal MLA.

"I never thought I'd see that here. This reflects a government that hasn't done its planning."

Action urged on CHR plea

The Calgary Sun
Thu 01 May 2008
Page: 4

Section: News

Byline: BY BILL KAUFMANN, SUN MEDIA

The province can't run away from a cash- and staff-squeezed Calgary Health Region's plea for \$123 million, Alberta NDP leader Brian Mason said yesterday. On Tuesday, CHR head honcho Jack Davis said rapid growth and labour shortfalls mean the system needs a \$123-million injection -- \$8 million more than the \$115 million the region requested during the provincial election to cover its operating deficit.

But yesterday, neither Health Minister Ron Liepert or his spokesman would comment on Davis' comments.

Alberta Health and Wellness spokesman Howard May said the CHR requests were the continuation of ones made in recent months and don't require a response. NDP leader Brian Mason said the Tory government can't duck the dysfunctional medical system it created in the 1990s when it slashed staffing and the number of Calgary hospital beds.

"It's government chickens coming home to roost," said Mason.

"It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out we need more general practitioners and hospital beds in Calgary."

The government, he added, is determined to accelerate development in the province without following up with medical resources.

"The government has established a very clear policy -- they won't touch the brakes on the economy yet refuse to take responsibility for the consequences," said Mason.

Housing and Urban Affairs

Infrastructure

International and Intergovernmental Relations

Justice & Attorney General

Municipal Affairs

Property taxes to jump 7.5%; Higher increase avoided by provincial freeze in education levy

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A1 / FRONT

Section: News

Byline: Gordon Kent

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: The Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Property taxes on the typical Edmonton home will increase \$153 this year.

Coun. Ron Hayter complained Wednesday, as council approved the 2008 tax hike, that the increase was based on "smoke and mirrors," with an 11.8-per-cent rise in the municipal share of taxes offset by a near-freeze in the education levy imposed by the province.

"Playing games with the school taxes makes it even more difficult for people to understand the process," said Hayter, the only councillor to vote against the overall 7.5-per-cent boost in total property taxes.

"It's very hard to be transparent with the way money is moved around."

Under the provincial budget released last week, Edmonton has \$25 million the province has allowed municipalities to claim from the portion of property taxes that could have been collected for provincial education funding.

Mayor Stephen Mandel felt this education tax "room" should have been used to pay for one-time projects in case it isn't available next year.

Council has already agreed to use \$5.4 million of that money to keep the tax increase from being two per cent higher, with \$2.6 million being spent hiring 30 new firefighters for the Lauderdale, Norwood and Callingwood stations and the rest directed to one-time items or the 2009 budget.

The changes mean a \$2,182 tax bill for the owner of a typical single-family house, which was worth \$400,000 when values were assessed last July 1.

That's up a record 64 per cent from the value one year earlier, but assessment and taxation branch manager Rod Risling took pains to make clear at a news conference that this doesn't mean taxes will rise by the same amount.

Property value only determines the owner's share of all the property taxes collected by the city, he said.

Homes that rise by the average will see taxes go up by the average amount, while those that had a larger or smaller price increase will have taxes increase by more or less than the average.

The only way the city takes in extra revenue is by boosting the tax rate or from construction growth, he said.

However, that's not clear to most people -- more than three-quarters of the respondents to a survey wrongly thought rising prices mean more money for the city, he said.

"The results were very, very clear. People do not understand the assessment process ... we're trying to educate the public."

Individual tax notices will be mailed out May 23. Taxes are due June 30.

Seniors & Community Supports

Service Alberta

Solicitor General & Public Security

Sustainable Resource Development

Transportation

Tourism, Parks and Recreation

***Miscellaneous Government**

MLAs pocket big paycheques: report

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: B5

Section: Alberta

Byline: Jason Fekete

Dateline: EDMONTON

Source: Calgary Herald; Canwest News Service

EDMONTON - A new report on provincial politicians' salaries shows all Tory MLAs made more than \$100,000 annually -- including tens of thousands of dollars for sitting on committees that some Conservatives acknowledged didn't do much work.

The report on payments to members of the legislative assembly, released Wednesday, shows even backbench Tory MLAs are earning well into six digits largely due to their work on myriad committees -- while most opposition members get paid far less.

The list of councils, commissions and committees paying out thousands to government and some opposition MLAs is long and lucrative.

"There's no free ride for any (Conservative) MLAs," said Tom Olsen, press secretary for Premier Ed Stelmach.

Calgary-Nose Hill Tory MLA Neil Brown earned more than \$126,000 in total salary and benefits in the 2006-07 fiscal year (the most recent data released), including about \$40,000 for memberships on several committees.

The payments included \$4,000 in one year for sitting on the International Development and Governance Advisory Committee.

"It had rather limited utility, I think, and probably that's why it's been done away with," Brown said.

The committee gave advice to the Intergovernmental Relations Department on overseas foreign aid projects and international partnerships, Brown said.

Calgary Tory Cindy Ady, now Tourism, Parks and Recreation Minister, received \$127,373 in total salary, including nearly \$40,000 for sitting on committees.

She received \$4,000 for her membership on the Idaho-Alberta Transboundary Task Force, despite no evidence that much work was done.

"That one didn't meet as frequently as some," Ady said.

Ray Danyluk, the Lac La Biche-St. Paul MLA and current Municipal Affairs Minister, was paid more than \$30,000 extra for all the committee work he did, including more than \$7,000 for the Alberta Recreation Corridors Co-ordinating Committee, a group intended to help create, manage and operate recreation trails in Alberta.

Calgary-Bow Conservative MLA Alana DeLong received more than \$20,000 for sitting on various panels, including \$5,250 for chairing the Nomination Review Committee for the Minister's Seniors Service Awards.

Only three opposition MLAs were paid a total salary of \$100,000 or more.

The list included Laurie Blakeman (\$103,016), Liberal Leader Kevin Taft (\$145,615) and NDP Leader Brian Mason (\$113,285).

Columnists/Editorial & Comment

Mother Nature's protest; The image of 500 ducks, silently lying at the bottom of a toxic lake, speaks volumes

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A18

Section: Opinion

Byline: Graham Thomson

Column: Graham Thomson

Source: The Edmonton Journal

A flock of birds has done what a gaggle of environmental protesters could not -- embarrass the Alberta government over development of the oilsands and focus a critical eye on how Alberta protects the environment.

Almost all of the estimated 500 migratory ducks that innocently landed on a Syncrude tailings pond Monday are dead or dying today. Maybe half a dozen survived.

It was an environmental protest as staged by Mother Nature -- and couldn't have been more effective if each bird had worn a little "Stop the Tar Sands" T-shirt as it disappeared beneath the surface of the toxic lake.

The end wouldn't have come quickly for the ducks. The oil and other chemicals in the sludge would have poisoned them inside and out, robbing them of their natural waterproof coating, and they would have eventually drowned. According to Syncrude officials, the bodies have sunk to the bottom of the lake so we don't have an exact number of dead.

Not that it matters if it was 400 or 500. The story made headlines around the world and has focused attention on the environmental impact of the oilsands with a drama that protesters and opposition politicians could only dream of.

It's one thing to tell people the oilsands produce toxic byproducts but quite another when people learn that animals die by the hundreds after swimming in those chemicals. It is one thing to call the giant pools of toxic waste by the innocuous term "ponds" but quite another when people learn the ponds are in essence gigantic open sewers from oilsands production. One of Syncrude's "ponds" has a circumference of 20 kilometres. You'd need more than two hours to walk around it.

Not that you'd be allowed anywhere near the ponds. They are closely guarded by the oilsands plants, which are supposed to use high-tech methods such as radar-operated noise cannons that frighten birds away before they can land on the toxic lakes. Syncrude has said its noise makers weren't working because "extreme winter weather conditions" the past week delayed the deployment of the cannon. Then a rapid spring thaw melted the ice on the tailings ponds, which presented the migrating birds with what to them looked like an enticing place to rest for a bit.

Both Syncrude and the government insist that the deaths of hundreds of birds from a single flock is unprecedented, that maybe a few dozen birds at most die in the ponds each year.

We'll just have to take the government's word for it. And the government will just have to take Syncrude's word for it.

When it comes to reporting these kinds of environmental disasters, the companies are pretty much on a self-monitoring or honour system. And it would appear the system didn't work smoothly, at least not from initial government finger pointing.

"The issue here is that there is a non-compliance of a very strict condition of the licence to operate," said a sombre Premier Ed Stelmach in a news conference on Tuesday.

Stelmach said the government wasn't told about the incident by Syncrude but by an anonymous tipster at 11 o'clock on Monday morning.

Syncrude officials insist they were just about to alert the government about the dead and dying birds at noon on Monday when the government called.

The government says the incident is under investigation and if Syncrude broke government regulations it faces penalties up to \$1 million. Not that Syncrude couldn't afford to pay such a fine. On Monday, as the birds made their fateful landing on the tailings pond, Syncrude announced a first-quarter profit of \$298 million, an increase of 14 per cent over the same period last year.

Dead and dying birds never make for positive headlines, but this week's environmental tragedy had particularly bad timing for the government. Deputy Premier Ron Stevens is in Washington, D.C., as part of the government's \$25-million public relations campaign to counter claims the oilsands is "dirty oil."

The government should be grateful, in a morbid way, that the dead birds sank to the bottom rather than bobbed to the surface. Otherwise, Syncrude workers would have to scoop up the carcasses of 500 birds -- and that wouldn't make for the best of photo ops if you're trying to convince the world your oil is not ethically and environmentally dirty.

Stelmach did try to put a brave face on the incident on Wednesday, saying his tough talk about punishing Syncrude if necessary "gives us an opportunity to tell not only our American trading partner but all the world that we mean business when it comes to the rules and regulations we have in place with respect to protection of environment."

He also predictably tried to present himself as a victim of the environmental lobby, saying the government's \$25-million public relations campaign "is small compared to the combined money of the various lobby groups that are out there." Oh, there are surely victims here -- roughly 500 of them lying silently at the bottom of a toxic lake.

500 fowl symbols tarnishing Alberta

The Edmonton Journal

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: A18

Section: Opinion

Source: The Edmonton Journal

After nearly 500 sludge-soaked ducks died in a Syncrude tailings pond this week, deputy premier Ron Stevens -- along with Syncrude brass -- has some serious explaining to do.

If success in politics and commerce has a lot to do with being in the right place at the right time, the timing couldn't be worse. Stevens, a Calgary MLA, is heading a provincial mission to Washington, D.C., charged with reassuring Americans that oilsands development in Alberta is clean, sustainable, safe and guiltless. That's a challenging order to begin with, amid campaigns by those environmentalists who pose exacting questions along with the rabid, headline-grabbing types determined to brand our northern petroleum products as the "dirtiest on the planet."

Whoever wins the next election as president, she or he will not be a friendly former oilman such as George W. Bush, not to mention his number 2, Dick Cheney. The U.S. Congress, already in a rhetorically protectionist mood, is likely to be even tougher given expected additions to the ranks of majority Democrats. Perceived high gasoline prices are pilloried daily, and anger is rising on all sides. Even as Stevens was telling Americans that "Alberta has a wonderful story" to tell about environmental sustainability, quite another news flash was breaking. It detailed the plight of waterfowl trapped in a toxic pond located 35 kilometres northeast of Syncrude's original oilsands site.

The initial reaction from both government and industry here was underwhelming, to understate it. The actual information came from an anonymous tip delivered to Alberta Environment's Fort McMurray office, as opposed to the ministry's own monitoring systems.

Meanwhile, although Premier Ed Stelmach insisted "the government of Alberta means business" on the incident, his first public response was to frame the situation as small and technical, a matter of process. "The company has to make sure they conform" to its licence, he said blandly, adding that Syncrude shouldn't be blamed until all the facts are in.

And speaking of bland, if not lame, opening gambits, that company's early explanation was that it hadn't yet deployed noise cannons to keep migrating birds away because of recent snowstorms.

You wonder if that explanation might be lost on U.S. legislators, since the noise cannons positioned just off the runway at Reagan International Airport operate all year, including blizzards. As well, the tailings pond lacked a staging area to launch emergency watercraft, so a crane had to be brought in to do the job, boat by boat.

The words of Environment Minister Rob Renner were much more appropriate, if not exactly reassuring. He pronounced the scene at the pond as "a tragedy," while admitting that "there are simply not enough wildlife officers, environmental

officers to be monitoring every operation throughout the entire province 365 days a year."

This admission poses a simple question. Why not?

No, we don't expect miracles from government or the corporate sector. But the oilsands are absolutely critical to maintaining our prosperity in this place, even as we watch others falter.

Changing political realities and outright hostility from certain corners in the land of our best customers is no secret. Selling a different, credible narrative than the doomsaying of our detractors will not be accomplished by mere honeyed words or slick ad campaigns. We had a teachable moment here to prove our capacity to avert a natural calamity and that opportunity was lost.

Albertans understand just how valuable, and often unfairly maligned our energy sector is. We make special allowances to keep enterprise singing, from royalty adjustments to regulations and beyond. But we expect both government and industry to not embarrass us and place our ultimate economic franchise in jeopardy.

On that score, it's been a bad week in Washington, Ft. McMurray and Edmonton.

Dead ducks a publicity nightmare

The Calgary Sun

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: 14

Section: Editorial/Opinion

Byline: BY ROY CLANCY

Column: Editorial

Syncrude Canada may be facing a \$1-million fine after nearly 500 ducks died on an oily, toxic tailings pond.

But that's small change compared to the damage done to a \$25-million Alberta government publicity campaign designed to promote the oilsands as environmentally friendly.

While Deputy Premier Ron Stevens was in Washington this week to tell U.S. legislators that Alberta's oilsands represent "an environmentally responsible source of energy supply to the United States," the story about the dead ducks was making headlines and garnering coverage on CNN.

As we've learned from the seal hunt, little can compete with the image of a suffering animal when it comes to winning public sympathy.

The death of the ducks is the result of some "unusual circumstances," according to Syncrude.

Sound cannons have effectively kept birds away from the poisonous waters at the mine for 30 years, but a winter storm delayed deployment of the system.

Of course, such troublesome details will quickly be lost in the massive public relations campaign being waged to discredit the oilsands in the eyes of the world. Premier Ed Stelmach called it a "David and Goliath" battle over public perception of the oilsands, a statement immediately ridiculed by Greenpeace and other groups who claimed they can't compete with multimillion-dollar campaigns. The jarring reality is a world panicking over a perceived global warming threat is eager for scapegoats.

The oilsands, currently the largest industrial project in the world and poised to become the largest single supplier of energy to the U.S., handily fits the bill. When it comes to the raw emotions surrounding the global warming issue, technical talk of carbon capture and storage have a hard time competing with pictures of dead ducks

Environmentalists torqued up the battle with a full-page ad in a Capital Hill newspaper this week, showing a Maple Leaf shaped photo of an oilsands mining landscape.

There's a lot riding on Stevens' visit. The U.S. Congress is considering repealing a provision that might block that country from importing fuel from Alberta's oilsands.

Interestingly, a scientist credited with helping unleash the commercial potential of the oilsands in the 1970s warned this week that its development could "hit a wall" unless the government makes it a priority to urgently fund projects designed to solve the environmental problems associated with it.

Given the importance of the oilsands to Alberta and Canada's future, the federal and provincial governments might want to pause and reflect deeply on his words.

Bad blood could cost city health boss his job

The Calgary Herald

Thu 01 May 2008

Page: B4

Section: City & Region

Byline: Don Braid

Column: Don Braid

Source: Calgary Herald

Jack Davis, CEO of the Calgary Health Region, is once again saying things the government does not want you to hear.

It might soon cost him his job, although there's no longer much evidence he gives a damn.

If Davis does get the golden boot, he'll be a collateral victim of the 2006 Tory leadership battle whose embers still burn with surprising heat.

Premier Ed Stelmach's loyalists have begun to see the CHR's complaints as more political than medical.

They think the CHR has become an opposition centre, and this they will not tolerate in a funded authority.

Davis wasn't talking about any of this Wednesday, but he has revealed that 137 patients are being treated in Calgary hospital hallways and lounges.

All those people would be in proper rooms if the government coughed up the money to open new beds at the Rockyview Hospital and Sheldon Chumir Centre. He has a point -- and it's not political.

The government paid for those facilities. Now it won't pay to open the beds, even though emergency wards are jammed, and people admitted to hospital are being treated in hallways.

The CHR is talking so freely about all this that key government players are even angrier.

That's OK -- Davis is a big boy who came from that same government. He knows the risks and he isn't exactly underpaid for his time.

But if the Tories are withholding funding because they're mad at one health region CEO, or even the region itself, the city should march on the legislature with pitchforks.

When I asked Davis recently whether he's ready to leave if health care reform costs him his job, he said, "absolutely, I've always said I'm here for one reason . . . if I can't help health-care providers do their work, I should be moving on."

Bad blood has been brewing between the CHR and government since early this year.

On Jan. 29, CHR chairman David Tuer went to a government press conference and asked the Tories to cover the region's deficit.

Dave Hancock, then the health minister, said he would not, because he didn't want to encourage more spending.

He was accusing the region of wastefulness. Tuer, standing behind the minister, looked furious.

Then came the election campaign, and the real trouble started.

The CHR took a calculated gamble by revealing on Feb. 18 that it had just had a dangerous weekend, with 241 people waiting in emergency rooms on one day.

The CHR brass bet that campaign pressure would force the government to cover the region's deficit.

It didn't work. Premier Ed Stelmach called a sudden news conference to say the CHR would get the money to pay the staff, but that was it; no money for the deficit.

The CHR's move was instantly marked down as political interference at a crucial moment of the campaign.

Influential Tories believe Davis was part of a Calgary cabal that hoped the party would lose seats, so Stelmach's leadership would soon be questioned.

Basically, they saw the CHR as the Trojan Horse from which Jim Dinning (a former chairman) would re-emerge to take over the province.

Then came March 3 and the big Tory majority. Payback time.

Although the CHR took a big risk, I've never seen the slightest evidence that Davis and Tuer care about anything but the best care for patients.

No matter. Everyone now expects the government to go through the place like a rocket. And one priority will be more central control, so no trace of opposition arises for a long, long time.