

Coalition urges slowdown on oilsands

Rapid development strains environment and economy, groups say

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EDMONTON - A coalition of groups in Alberta called on the provincial government today to stop approving any more oilsands projects.

The groups represent a wide variety of interests: First Nations communities, environmental organizations, scientists, health care sector employees, labour, faith communities and social justice groups.

All of them feel the rapid pace of oilsands development has put too much strain on the quality of air, land, health and the economy in Alberta's communities.

They will be adding pressure to their call by running ads in newspapers in the home ridings of Premier Ed Stelmach in Vegreville, Environment Minister Rob Renner in Medicine Hat, and Energy Minister Mel Knight in Grande Prairie.

"It's time to stop and think!" read the ads, which then go on to list nine reasons to halt development.

Among the reasons is the high inflation and shortage of health-care professionals, affordable housing and workers for critical infrastructure, caused by the overheated economy.

None of this is likely to abate, as Stelmach's government has not made even a token attempt to articulate a plan for the pace of oil development, said Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, at a press conference

McGowan said he disagrees with the government's premise that if they do anything to put limits on development it will kill the golden goose.

"It's an example of being penny wise and pound foolish," he said.

While the gold rush of investment is making us rich today, it's not building a



CREDIT: Rick MacWilliam/Edmonton Journal

The Athabasca River, with Suncor's oilsands plant in the background.

strong, diversified base for the future, McGowan said. Fostering an overheated economy prices us out of the market for more sustainable projects, he said.

Lindsay Telfer of the Sierra Club says it irks her to see Stelmach equate slowing development with economic catastrophe.

"He doesn't think about the true cost of environmental degradation."

Peter Cyprien, a resident of Fort Chipewyan, said his people are already paying the cost.

People used to be able to drink from the Athabasca River, but now nobody does, said Cyprien, who is co-chairman of the recently formed Keepers of the Athabasca.

Fish pulled from the river often have tumours, while people who kill moose "find sickness in them" and so don't eat the meat, he said.

"So they're taking our livelihood from us."

Alberta Environment says the government is protecting the environment.

"There are a large number of safeguards in place to protect the environment, and we don't proceed with oilsands development at the cost of the environment," said Jim Law, a ministry spokesman.

"The oilsands are a resource that's vital not only to this province but to all Canadians," he added. "We will proceed with development in an environmentally responsible manner."

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