



Oil Sands

A strategic resource for Canada, North America and the global market

Land Use and Reclamation

100 percent of land must be reclaimed

Oil sands development is subject to environmental standards that are among the most stringent in the world. The Government of Alberta requires that companies remediate and reclaim 100 percent of the land after the oil sands have been extracted.

Reclamation means that land is returned to a self-sustaining boreal forest ecosystem with local vegetation and wildlife. Oil sands companies must file a Conservation and Reclamation Plan as part of their initial project application, keep it current and post financial security bonds for reclamation. Governments ensure that all oil sands companies fulfil their legal obligation to reclaim the land.

Long before the landscape is touched by development, comprehensive assessments identify potential environmental impacts, such as those affecting land, air, water and biodiversity. Steps are then taken during the life of a project to minimize any negative effects.

In the oil sands area, the Government of Alberta has committed to conserving and protecting more than 2 million hectares (20 000 square kilometres [km²] or 7722 square miles [sq. mi.]) of habitat for native species as part of the 2011 Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, in addition to the almost 4.5 million hectares (44 800 km², 17 300 sq. mi.) of federally protected land – Wood Buffalo National Park, just north of the oil sands.

Oil sands mineable area is 0.2 percent of Canada's boreal forest

Canada's oil sands are the third largest proven deposit of crude oil in the world, with a reserve of 169 billion barrels.¹

The oil sands are found in Western Canada and are located within the boundaries of Canada's boreal forest, which stretches more than 5000 km (3100 mi.) from coast to coast and covers about 30 percent of the country's land mass. The total area of the oil sands that is accessible through surface mining represents 0.2 percent of Canada's boreal forest.²



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¹ Alberta Energy Resources Conservation.

² The boreal forest, as described here, includes forest and other wooded land in Canada's boreal zone.

Most future development will be drilled, not mined

Oil sands bitumen can be extracted by two methods: mining and in-situ.

Reserves near the surface can only be accessed through mining. In this process, the bitumen is dug up, mixed with water and separating agents and agitated to separate the bitumen from the sand and clay. Mining operations require the removal of all vegetation and top soil to access the raw oil sands. These removed materials are then stored for use later in reclamation.

Reserves too deep to mine require some form of drilling technology. Drilled production, also known as in-situ production, generally involves drilling wells and pumping steam underground to separate the bitumen from the sand and clays and then recovering the bitumen through the wells.

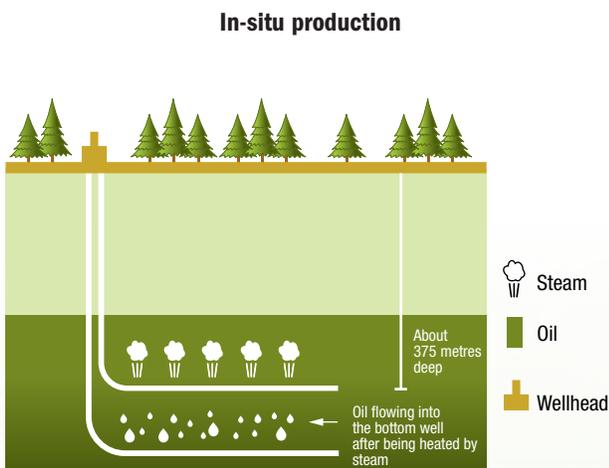
Eighty percent, or 135 billion barrels, can only be recovered through drilling, or in-situ technology, while the balance, 34 billion barrels, can be accessed through mining.³

In-situ land disturbance is one-seventh the size of similar-sized mining projects

Land impacts from in-situ projects are about one-seventh the size of a similar mining operation,⁴ and no tailings ponds are produced. As a result, site reclamation occurs much more quickly and requires less remediation.

Similar to other types of surface mining, the life span of these oil sands projects is 40 to 60 years. Given that oil sands have only been mined since 1967, reclamation is just beginning and will take many years.

Since 1967, 761 km² (294 sq. mi.) of land have been disturbed by mining activity. This is an area smaller than the area of New York, London, Berlin or Kyoto. Once mining is complete in these areas, all of the land will be reclaimed.



Source: Cenovus, adapted by Natural Resources Canada, 2010.



³ Alberta Environment (2009): *Environmental Management of Alberta's Oil Sands*.

⁴ The Pembina Institute (2010): *Mining vs. In-situ*.