



*Bishop Murray Chatlain*  
*R.C. Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith*  
*5117 - 52<sup>nd</sup> Street*  
*Yellowknife, NT X1A 1T7*

As Bishop of the Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, I join the call for the suspension of rapid growth of the tar sands in Alberta. Let me begin by giving a brief outline of the tar sands.

Northern Alberta has large areas of sand that are laced with oil. The oil can be removed by strip mining or, when it is too deep in the ground, melted with steam and pumped to the surface. Mining requires the use of large amounts of water, between 2 and 4.5 barrels of water for each barrel of oil produced. Steam extraction takes place on a much larger scale as 80% of the reserves require this approach. The waste water from oil sands extraction is stored in large tailing ponds or deep wells near the Athabasca River.

According to the National Geographic March 2009 issue: “The oil sands cover an area the size of North Carolina, and the provincial government has already leased around half that, including all 1,356 square miles that are minable. It has yet to turn down an application to develop one of these leases, on environmental or any other grounds.”

The call for suspension comes from concern for the environmental, social and cultural impacts of the rapid growth. In particular, I raise concern over the impact on northern rivers and the people who rely on these waters who are the people of our Diocese.

The Diocese of Mackenzie-Ft. Smith includes Lake Athabasca and the water that flows into the Slave Delta, Great Slave Lake and then the Mackenzie River up to the Arctic Ocean. Traditionally, the waters of the Athabasca and Slave Rivers have been routes of connection between southern and northern communities. Now the rivers threaten to become a source of division.



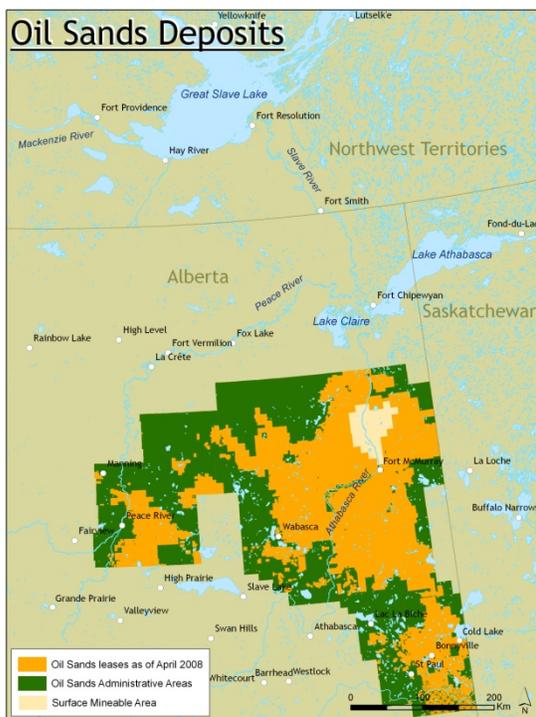
*photo credit Rene Fumoleau 1976*

The world’s present financial struggle has meant a significant slowing of the pace of development for the tar sands. This could well be a grace-filled opportunity to ask some realistic questions about where this development is taking us.

I join my brother Bishop Luc Bouchard of St. Paul in Alberta in expressing concern. In his January 2009 Pastoral letter “The Integrity of Creation and the Athabasca Oil Sands”, Bishop Bouchard summarizes the principles of Catholic theology on environmental issues.

He then outlines the environmental impacts of the oil sands development and proposes an action plan to safeguard creation.

Water is a fundamental human right and a gift from the Creator. In Exodus 17:1 – 7, Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt but to a place where there was no water for them to drink. The people complained to Moses. God responded to their pleas and gave instructions to Moses on how to find water. Water was part of God’s commitment to the Israelites.



M. Palmer, Nature Conservancy

In the Mackenzie River Basin, the presence of water is abundant. First Nations give thanks to the Creator for these waters. But in the face of threats to these waters, the people of the North call out to God for assistance as they petition governments.

Many Dene and Metis have expressed concern at community meetings and

conferences, through petitions, and dialogue with Government. Their concern moved them to produce the movie Tu Beta Ts’ena (Water Is Life). There are many statements of wisdom in this film. George Mackenzie, Grand Chief of the Tlicho government, says “Water to the Dene people and to other northerners is everything to us.” Elder Mary Heron of the Slave River First Nations worries that “the trees, the grass, the plants, they can’t speak for themselves so someone has to.” These statements show the continued importance of the land and water to the lives of northern people.

In addition to concern about the quality and quantity of water, there is a legitimate concern about potential impacts on human health. The people of Fort Chipewyan, despite Government denials, have repeatedly noted a change in their health status since the development of the tar sands. A careful monitoring of changes to northern waters and discharges of pollution is critical. What guarantees do we have that there will be clean water after the development is finished?

In the report “Water That Binds Us”, the Pembina Institute notes there have been negotiations on a transboundary water agreement between Alberta and the Northwest Territories since 1997, but no agreement has yet been completed. This has left an opening for development to proceed without enough checks and balances. Pembina notes that “current efforts are not enough to ensure that water remains clean and plentiful north of the oil sands region.”

The people of the North have the right to participate in the process of review around the tar sands. Tar sands development is taking place on Treaty 8 territory and the Dene are signatories to Treaty 8.

The Alberta government and industrial developers must set legally binding limits to development that will protect northern waters, as if these waters flowed in their own backyards.

There is another issue that links the North to the tar sands. Natural gas is the cleanest burning fossil fuel. Working the tar sands requires large amounts of natural gas. If it proceeds, the Mackenzie Gas Project will make large amounts of natural gas available. It would be a disappointing use of a rich resource if Mackenzie natural gas was used for obtaining this environmentally costly oil. This action will contribute to the climate change impacts that Northerners are experiencing.

First Nations have long understood the urgency of taking care of the land and water. With our growing understanding of the environmental crisis and its link to human wellness, all Catholics are called to work towards active changes that will protect the environment. Together, we must call for and work towards:

- Suspension of new oil sands lease sales and oil sands project approvals until there is a proper understanding of the combined effects of this development into the future;
- The establishment of limits and guidelines to protect the environment and people in Alberta and downstream in the NWT;
- A commitment to hold environmental hearings, with right of participation of NWT communities on the cumulative effects of the tar sands projects;
- A legally binding transboundary agreement on water between the NWT and Alberta;

- A commitment to use dry tailings technology for all future oil sand development, and
- Support for more environmentally sound energy sources and overall energy conservation to ensure that we do not take away opportunities for future generation.

In the Canadian Bishops response to the United Nations Year of the Planet Earth “The Need for Conversion”, the Bishops write: “Ecological challenges offer us an opportunity to embark once more on the paths of the Gospel. In the biblical sense of the term this is a “favourable time” to strengthen our ties with God by allowing ourselves to be infused with the freshness of the Gospel.” May the cold, clear water of the North be a source of inspiration for our work.

April 15, 2009

Bishop Murray Chatlain  
Diocese of Mackenzie-Ft. Smith