

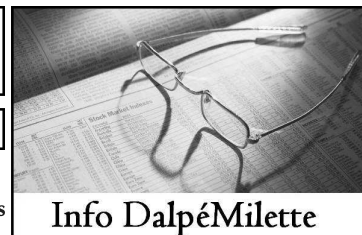
Sujet: Des sables bitumineux plus propres. / Cleaner oil sands.

Source: Financial Post

Date: 19-5-2010



Membre FCPE



ENERGY

CNO CITES BIG BREAK CLEANING TAILINGS

FAR LESS WATER USE

By CARRIE TAIT

CALGARY • Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. has made what it says are "promising" steps in solving some of the most challenging environmental problems associated with oil sands tailings ponds.

The Calgary-based company said it is using far less — only 12% to 14% — of the fresh water it expected to remove from the Athabasca River at its Horizon oil-sands mine near Fort McMurray.

Furthermore, Canadian Natural thinks it has sped up the time needed to clean up the toxic ponds, all while also sequestering carbon dioxide, key in reducing emissions.

"It looks like a very, very promising process," Steve Laut, the company's president, told reporters yesterday.

The company said the process works by injecting carbon dioxide into the lines that transfer contaminated water out of its oil-sands mining facilities and into toxic waste ponds. This technological twist forces clay and silt to settle at the bottom of the lakes faster than expected, leaving about 12 metres of clear water on top.

"If you can get [the clay and silt] to settle quicker, then you can reclaim the ponds quicker [and] the ponds get smaller," Mr. Laut said.

That water is then reused in the bitumen extraction process, meaning less water is needed from the river.

This tailings pond system also means carbon dioxide is sequestered, a process that conserves heat and in turn means lower emissions, Mr. Laut said.

See TAILINGS on Page FP4

Minimizing freshwater use 'a step in the right direction'

TAILINGS

Continued from Page FP1

Tailings ponds store the byproducts of the bitumen extraction that takes place during oilsands development. They contain a toxic sludge of bitumen remnants, clay, sand and metals.

Hamid Habibi, an academic slated to become the founding director of the Institute of Environmental Toxicology at the University of Alberta, is encouraged by Canadian Natural's advances, but worries other problems may emerge.

"This is a step in the right direction," he said. "By minimizing the [freshwater] vol-

umes, it is very significant."

But as Canadian Natural reduces the amount of water it uses "that's going to increase the concentration [of the toxins in the clay and silt and] then we haven't achieved as much as we hoped," he said.

Meanwhile, the government of Alberta yesterday said it is negotiations with North West Upgrading Inc. and Canadian Natural to support a proposed refinery via its new bitumen royalty plan. The heavy oil facility is designed to capture and store CO₂.

The proposed refinery, which will be located near Edmonton and process 150,000 barrels of bitumen per day when running at full steam,

would process 75,000 barrels of bitumen for the province, which the government would collect as part of a plan to take oil sands royalties in the form of bitumen rather than cash. This is part of Alberta's plan to increase the amount of bitumen upgraded and refined in the province, which it hopes will stir economic prosperity and reduce the amount of CO₂ pumped into the atmosphere.

"It's not a done deal but I am committed to pursuing an agreement that's in the best interest of Albertans," Ron Liepert, the province's Energy Minister, said in a statement.

Financial Post
ctait@nationalpost.com

CANADIAN NATURAL RESOURCES LTD.

Ticker CNQ/TSX
Close \$70.78, down 59¢
Volume 2,129,166
Avg. 6-month vol. 1,874,347

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