

Panellists debate oilsands impact

BY DINA O'MEARA, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 13, 2009

A lack of planning and public engagement on the development of the oilsands by Alberta has helped make the resource an international target of disdain, a student energy summit heard in Calgary Friday.

A panel representing a mix of industry players, environmental activists and lobby groups confronted the often-contentious issue of the development of Alberta's oilsands, which has been lambasted as "dirty" by interest groups around the world.

Unfettered development, lack of public and stakeholder engagement, and a lack of vision from provincial and federal governments have laid the groundwork for current controversy, said journalist Andrew Nikiforuk.

"I don't think the targeting of the oilsands is going to go away," Nikiforuk told an audience of university students. "I think it will probably increase because we have yet to see a strong public policy response in Canada that deals with the critical issues of the pace of development, the use of water, greenhouse gas emissions. Until we see that, we'll continue to see investors asking questions."

Alberta's oilsands resources have been the focus of increasing public condemnation for the impact its development has had on the environment, from high carbon dioxide emissions to concerns about mining operations releasing cancer-causing agents into local waterways.

Industry insiders noted they rank low in popularity scales, but said corporations are working toward environmental and social solutions presented by oilsands challenges.

"It's always easy to say there could be more stakeholder engagement, but the actual responsibility lies with all of us," said Calvin Duane, with Canadian Natural Resources Ltd.'s Horizon project.

ConocoPhillips senior vice-president of oilsands Matt Fox noted Canada has one of the toughest and most complex regulatory structures around oil development compared with other countries. He added petroleum corporations are shifting their focus from just oil and gas.

"It's clear we're going to need a broad mix of energy resources in the future," Fox said. "But hydrocarbons will be a part of it for a long time."

Jennifer Grant with the Pembina Institute, agreed oilsands could bridge a shift to alternative energy sources, "but frankly, we need to put appropriate limits in place."

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