

Thirsty oilsands worry scientists

By BROOKES MERRITT <mailto:bmmerritt@edmsun.com> -- Sun Media
Friday, May 11, 2007

University of Alberta water expert Dr. David Schindler says oilsands companies are using water unsustainably.

A paper he co-wrote urges government and oil CEOs to be more responsible. "If we haven't already passed it, we're on the brink of overtaxing the Athabasca River because of the oilsands," Schindler said yesterday.

The paper was presented at a university forum yesterday. Industry CEOs didn't attend, said Schindler.

"It's ironic because a CEO's job is to make profit. If they continue to turn a blind eye to water problems, investors will eventually feel a big hit," he said.

Schindler said Alberta faces problems if energy firms in the oilsands keep drawing water without returning it.

"Warmer temperatures are reducing the water flow so much it's as if an invisible oilsands plant were tapping the river every two years. Alberta Environment's current framework is dated and hasn't accounted for climate change," said Schindler.

Co-author Dr. Vic Adamowicz has suggestions to improve water-use efficiency. Most involve "monetizing" the resource, Schindler said -- things like fees for unrecyclable water and trading incentives where companies could sell rights to water they don't use.