

Lougheed backs Stelmach's pro-oilsands campaign

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Last Updated: September 17, 2010 3:47pm

Premier Ed Stelmach's effort to polish the image of the oilsands among those U.S. politicians critical of mining operations is receiving praise from a highly respected public figure.

"He is doing what he should be doing, and he is working hard at it, and very effectively," former Alberta premier Peter Lougheed told the Calgary Sun on Friday.

"It's extremely useful because there has been a misrepresentation by those that are negative about the Alberta oilsands."

Stelmach travelled to Ottawa last week, where he met with Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House of Representatives, to make a pitch for the oilsands. And this week, a group of U.S. senators has toured the oilsands and met with the premier.

"It's very, very important to concentrate on getting that message across in the United States," Lougheed said, referring to the fact Canada is the largest and most secure supplier of oil to its southern neighbour.

Opposition to crude imports, much of which comes from surface mining operations in Alberta, has been building in the U.S., especially since TransCanada has applied to build a pipeline from the oilsands to the refineries on the Gulf coast.

The resistance isn't just coming from environmental groups. Several prominent U.S. politicians, especially Congressman Henry Waxman, want their country to become less reliant on the oilsands, because they are a more energy-intensive form of oil production.

Most of this criticism is focusing on oilsands mining operations, not the in-situ operations, where steam is injected to melt the bitumen out of the ground.

Lougheed said it's important to make that distinction, and not to refer to the oilsands in a general term. He said it's partially the media's failure most people don't make that distinction.

"I've been saying it for some time, that the focus in Alberta, and Alberta public policy, should be on the in-situ side," he said. Government can promote more in-situ production by a "more orderly development" of the oilsands, such as allowing only two mining projects proceed at any given time.

Mining operations account for the vast bulk of the oil coming out of the oilsands, but in-situ operations are slowly becoming more prominent. The Oilsands Developers Group forecasts that within the next decade, in-situ oilsands extraction will overtake bitumen mining in terms of production.

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