

Putting a kinder, gentler face on Alberta's oil sands

Pat Nelson brings a warm face to a beleaguered industry

CALGARY HERALD JUNE 4, 2010 7:08 AM

In his book *Why We Hate the Oil Companies*, John Hofmeister, the former president of Shell Oil, describes the lamentable inability of the industry to get its message out to a public that believes it is nasty, rich and dirty.

"The industry has a real serious problem. The industry lives in public relations solitude. It does very little to engage the consuming public or the voting public or really anybody except who they think is a key stakeholder in what they're doing. As a result, very few people know what the industry actually does," Hofmeister recently told an interviewer.

Part of the problem, he said, is that most oil people are engineering geeks who use stultifyingly dull language. "If you look at the track record of most oil executives, they tend to be of engineering or technical backgrounds," said Hofmeister.

Pat Nelson, the former Alberta energy minister, agrees. Nelson is vice chair of the unfortunately named In Situ Oil Sands Alliance. In situ is Latin for "in place." Say it fast and it sounds like "a tissue" or "incest you." In meetings with policy-makers on both sides of the border, Nelson says the term generates blank stares and looks of bewilderment.

Once she explains what in situ is all about -- the production of bitumen from the oilsands without disruptive surface mining -- decision-makers on the verge of banning Canadian oil in the Lower 48 begin to reconsider. "Of the 140,000 square kilometres of oilsands in Alberta, 98 per cent of it will be developed through in situ processes," Nelson recently told the Herald's editorial board. "It has a huge future and the future does rest with the in situ side." Just under half of current oilsands production currently comes from in situ development. About 20 billion barrels of recoverable crude is currently under in situ leases.

"The reason I got involved was because of the lack of communication between the industry and the public and the raw messages that I thought were so detrimental to everyone because they were so skewed in a direction that was not real any more," Nelson said. "I was, quite frankly, disappointed and fearful of where the negative messaging out there was going."

Glen Schmidt, president and CEO of Laricina Energy Ltd. and chair of IOSA, admits the industry has focused too much on engaging the financial community and regulators.

"We spent no time engaging the public. I think that is an admission of fact."

According to Hofmeister, people in the industry "don't tend to put a human face out there for people to

get to know." Nelson, we think, is a good start. She has a woman's touch and likes to talk, for instance, of the baby buffalo that are being raised on an oilsands site reclaimed by Syncrude and sent to repopulate bison populations throughout the West and yet she also points out that in situ bitumen has lower carbon emissions than California crude and she spouts the numbers to prove it.

With an environmental lobby eager to paint the oilsands as the biggest environmental calamity on the planet, the industry needs all the warm and fuzzy it can get and deserves.

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