

Abstract

Oiled Wildlife Response in the Oil Sands of Alberta

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For the past several years, Focus Wildlife (FW) has provided wildlife response services for companies operating in the oil sands region of Alberta, Canada. Prior to FW involvement, no professional oiled wildlife response was undertaken in the province. Although it was ignored for the past thirty years, the rehabilitation of impacted wildlife in the oil sands suddenly became an urgent matter in the spring of 2008, after hundreds of migratory birds landed in oil sands tailing ponds and died. The oil sands industry had increasingly come under international scrutiny because of what is considered to be one of the most polluting energy-extracting operations in the world. FW was hired by several oil sands companies to provide wildlife response services. During the course of providing these services, it became clear that there were unique challenges. Regulatory agency guidelines lacked clarity and were largely left open to interpretation by the responsible parties (RP). Regulations were without requirement for the RP to provide for the care of impacted wildlife. Traditional infrastructure and professional response protocols (ICS facility requirements, wildlife response expertise) were regarded as unnecessary by oil companies and methods found acceptable for the prior thirty years were supported by regulatory agencies, including the capture, evaluation and “euthanasia” of oiled wildlife by unskilled company employees. Logistically, the oil sands geographic location and internal bureaucracy presented barriers to the timely acquisition of supplies and response facility requirements as basic as water, food and electricity. In addition, the unique chemical composition of bitumen oil required the immediate and ongoing revision of protocols for care. This paper will discuss how oiled wildlife response in the oil sands is uniquely complex, how the challenges of caring for wildlife were met and how the lessons learned can be applied to traditional oil spill response.