

Alberta oil spill kills hundreds of birds

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CALGARY — Alberta's oil and gas industry is again in the environmental dock, as a spill at an oil well in the province has killed up to 500 ducks and swallows, according to reports from the scene.

The birds died after landing in the spill, which was found Monday at an out-of-service conventional oil well in the southwest corner of CFB Suffield, in southeastern Alberta. The well is operated by Calgary-based Harvest Energy Trust.

The new deaths have occurred at a bad time for Canadian oil companies, whose public image was hit earlier this year when 500 ducks and other waterfowl strayed into a waste pond at the Syncrude Canada Ltd. oil sands facility. Pictures of those oil-covered birds made international headlines, as environmental groups used the incident to illustrate the perceived hazards resulting from oil sands development.

The Harvest leak is from a conventional oil field, and not related to the oil sands. However, it's still the latest "environmental catastrophe" to hit the province, said Greenpeace Canada spokesman Mike Hudema.

"It really points to the fact that the environment in Alberta is not under good hands or good management right now. Things are really spinning wildly out of control," he said.

Both the province and Ottawa could be doing more to protect wildlife and the environment in the face of relentless development of oil and gas resources, he added.

"There's definitely a huge problem in terms of provincial and federal management when it comes to the environmental situation here," Mr. Hudema said.

David Pryce, vice-president for the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said that the incident was "unfortunate" and that the industry would examine it the incident closely.

"What the industry needs to do, and will do, is take steps to learn from this," he said. "We need to make sure we are doing an appropriate job."

The leak was discovered by a surveying crew operating in the region, but it's not yet clear why it occurred or for how long oil seeped from the well, said Davis Sheremata, spokesman for the Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board, the provincial regulator.

Up to 90 barrels of oil were leaked from the well, which was drilled by Harvest Energy on Dec. 5, 2005, but plugged and abandoned only days later on the 14th. Harvest Energy chief executive John Zahary said the trust has begun cleanup work at the well, the majority most of which is expected to be completed by today.

While Alberta has no inspection program for wells that have been abandoned, such wells must be plugged and covered with seven metres of concrete, and regulations had been followed by Harvest, Mr. Sheremata said.

“It is very rare for this to happen,” he said. “The majority of leaks happen at wells that are being drilled or are just going into production. This is highly unusual.”

Environment Canada spokeswoman Paula Franchellini said investigators were assessing the spill, but details are still scant. Ottawa says no waterways have been polluted.

“We are assessing the situation in a broad context and we have enforcement officials on site to determine whether any charges will be warranted,” Ms. Franchellini said.

Last April, 500 ducks and other waterfowl died in northern Alberta after landing in a toxic tailings pond operated by Syncrude. The company said a spring snowstorm that hit the oil sands region prevented the company from erecting noisemakers around the pond to scare away migratory birds.

But the incident proved to be a public-relations nightmare for the company, which was targeted by environmentalists who said the bird deaths were an example of the negative impact of so-called “dirty oil.”

Syncrude took out full-page newspaper ads to apologize, but both the federal and provincial governments started probes. The Alberta government opened an investigation under the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, which carries a maximum fine of \$1-million. A spokeswoman with Alberta Environment said she expects the province will make an announcement this month about whether there will be any charges in the case.

In July, Greenpeace activists broke into the Syncrude site to display banners at the tailings pond where the ducks died. In response, Syncrude initiated a \$120,000 lawsuit against the environmental organization.

At the time of the duck deaths, Federal Environment Minister John Baird said he wasn't “happy” with the situation and wanted to “get to the bottom of it.”

“I want to hold those that are responsible to account and we want to make sure it doesn't happen again,” he said.