

PUT IT BACK THE WAY YOU FOUND IT

G. DeSORCY

VICE CHAIRMAN, ALBERTA ENERGY RESOURCES CONSERVATION BOARD

Thank you Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure for me to address this annual meeting of the Canadian Land Reclamation Association.

Turning now to reclamation, the topic of the day, I, probably like a lot of you, initially learned about reclamation from my parents. My mother would say "you kids leave that room the way you found it", or my father would hand me a shovel and say "put that garden back into shape". However you people, unlike myself, have gone on to develop a special expertise in reclamation. This is evidenced by the impressive list of papers being presented at this meeting.

Not being an expert in the area, I am not going to waste your time attempting to deal with the technical aspects of reclamation. Rather what I am going to do is briefly outline for you the role of the ERCB in reclamation, relay to you our perceptions of the landowners' reactions to reclamation, and suggest a few ways in which all of us might better inform these landowners, and the general public, as to what is being accomplished in the field of reclamation.

ROLE OF THE ERCB

As many of you are aware, the ERCB is a provincial agency which regulates most aspects of energy resource development in Alberta. It does not have a lead role in reclamation. The ultimate responsibility for that important aspect of the energy business rests with Alberta Environment. However, there are two exceptions: The Board does have some direct involvement in that it is represented on two committees which are part of Alberta Environment's Land Conservation and Reclamation Council, specifically the Exploration Review Committee and the Development and Reclamation Review Committee. And secondly, with respect to certain accidental occurrences in energy operations, the Board has first line involvement in reclamation and rehabilitation, with a prime example being the clean-up of oil spills.

In addition there are two other activities of the Board which are very significant. First, because the Board has an approving responsibility with respect to essentially all energy resource developments, and because its legislation requires a hearing process when potentially affected parties object to a development, this means that the Board frequently hears from landowners at public hearings who often raise issues of reclamation, and request that the manner of creating the disturbance be regulated, such as to make the ultimate successful reclamation more easily attainable.

The second activity of importance occurs because the Board has field offices and inspection staff located throughout the province. In this manner it hears from landowners when they have complaints about industry operations or developments, including problems which are related to reclamation.

As a result of these two sources of information, either comments at public hearings or complaints registered at our field offices, the Board has a unique opportunity to hear from landowners.

RECLAMATION ISSUES AS PERCEIVED BY THE ERCB

I have reduced the general comments heard from landowners by the Board and its staff into a list of questions, and conclusions or issues, which seem to represent a consensus position of those landowners that we hear from. In doing so, and in passing them on to you, I have to acknowledge that they are based on reactions from a limited sample of landowners. Nevertheless, it is a large enough sample that I believe the results do have meaning.

The messages that we are hearing and that I want to pass on to you are as follows:

1. An increasing number of landowners are aware of and seem to like the attention being paid to reclamation, particularly, in the project planning stage. But concerns do remain and many landowners appear to be unaware of or unconvinced that lands will be successfully reclaimed.

2. The rural agricultural community has a deep-rooted concern that too much prime land is being taken out of agricultural production or is having its productivity reduced.
3. There are sufficient examples of less than perfect reclamation in the past to provide landowners with an arsenal of reclamation issues with which to oppose proposed projects. This is particularly the case because the agricultural community has become increasingly organized and there is an on-going exchange of information from one region of the province to another.
4. There are some concerns that the agency which approves disturbances is not responsible for the reclamation. Landowners thus contend that insufficient care is being exercised at the approval stage to ensure that reclamation can be accomplished.
5. A number of landowners are concerned that there are hidden chemicals or other pollutants in the soil which may be a long-term problem. A problem that they will be left with after reclamation has been approved and the resource development company has departed.
6. Many landowners feel that they don't receive sufficient compensation to cover the risk of reclamation. They worry that reclamation will not be successful and there will be a long-term negative impact on the soil.
7. The landowners and the general public do not appear to realize how much knowledge and technical expertise exists in regard to reclamation and the rate at which it is being improved. For example, I doubt that many of them know this association exists or that meetings such as this one are held to discuss the highly technical aspects of reclamation.
8. I am pleased to report that an increasing number of landowners are noting and commenting on improvements in lease construction and sump disposal methods and other aspects of land disturbance. The message that these improvements are being made however, is not being widely

distributed. Many opinions being expressed by landowners are not based on what is happening today but rather on problems that occurred in the past.

9. There is confusion among landowners as to which government department is responsible for reclamation. Since the ERCB holds public hearings and investigates complaints, many landowners assume it has final responsibility for reclamation. I expect there are some in the industry itself that are confused as to where government responsibilities lie in this regard.

NECESSARY ACTIONS

Assuming that the matters I have just reviewed to to some extent reflect the consensus of landowners, the next question is what should be done about it. It is necessary to deal with the negative comments of landowners who are being affected by energy developments in such a way that we can ensure that the positive messages we are beginning to hear will become more prevalent in future. Obviously continued development of reclamation technology, which you people are so involved in, must continue. Also those interfacing with landowners must treat them in an open, honest and fair way as well as being businesslike. Additionally however, all of us must work to ensure that the landowners know that reclamation is being considered in the project planning stage, that satisfactory reclamation is going to occur, that much research is taking place regarding reclamation and that organizations like this one exist. We in the public sector must take steps to minimize the overlapping of jurisdictions among government departments and to make certain that the landowners and the industry understand which government departments carry specific reclamation responsibilities.

How can we do these things? The most important way in my view is to get out into the rural community and tell the people what is going on in reclamation. This can be done through local fairs and expositions and also by being available to attend meetings of agricultural groups and by making it known that experts are available for that role.

Initiatives should be taken by reclamation groups in industry and government to set up seminars in rural areas. Attendance of opinion leaders from the agricultural communities at conferences such as this one should be encouraged.

It is important to have available brochures or pamphlets describing what is taking place in reclamation and what the various government departments' responsibilities are, but these must be relatively brief and written in down-to-earth language.

I know that all of these things I have mentioned are occurring to some extent now. What I am suggesting is that we should be going further. Reclamation technology is improving steadily. The reclamation work that we see taking place is generally good and it is improving. What we must do is increase efforts to make the landowners and the general public aware of these accomplishments and that the industry and government are serious about reclamation. Whether we like it or not, a message commonly heard on hearings is that the industry and government lack credibility.

Through greater efforts in the areas I've outlined, I believe there will come a day when the landowner can ask "Are you going to put it back the way you found it?" and we will be able to answer "yes, sir", with confidence that all of us will understand what the other means.



**NINTH ANNUAL MEETING
CANADIAN LAND
RECLAMATION ASSOCIATION**

**RECLAMATION IN MOUNTAINS,
FOOTHILLS AND PLAINS:
DOING IT RIGHT!**

**AUGUST 21-24, 1984
Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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CANADIAN LAND RECLAMATION ASSOCIATION
PROCEEDINGS OF THE NINTH ANNUAL MEETING

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Wednesday, August 22

1. Wildland Reclamation and Reforestation of Two Coal Strip Mines in Central Alberta
(J.C. BATEMAN, H.J. QUAN)
2. Successful Introduction of Vegetation on Dredge Spoil
(K.W. DANCE, A.P. SANDILANDS)
3. Planning and Designing for Reclaimed Landscapes at Seton Lake, B.C.
(L. DIAMOND)
4. Reclamation of Urad Molybdenum Mine, Empire, Colorado
(L.F. BROWN, C.L. JACKSON)
5. Effects of Replaced Surface Soil Depth on Reclamation Success at the Judy Creek Test Mine
(A. KENNEDY)
6. Preparation of Mine Spoil for Tree Colonization or Planting
(D.F. FOURT)
7. Control of Surface Water and Groundwater for Terrain Stabilization - Lake Louise Ski Area
(F.B. CLARIDGE, T.L. DABROWSKI, M.V. THOMPSON)
8. Montane Grassland Revegetation Trials
(D.M. WISHART)
9. Development of a Reclamation Technology for the Foothills - Mountain Region of Alberta
(T.M. MACYK)
10. A Study of the Natural Revegetation of Mining Disturbance in the Klondike Area, Yukon Territory
(M.A. BRADY, J.V. THIRGOOD)
11. Landslide Reforestation and Erosion Control in the Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.
(W.J. BEESE)
12. The Use of Cement Kiln By-Pass Dust as a Liming Material in the Revegetation of Acid, Metal-Contaminated Land
(K. WINTERHALDER)

Thursday, August 23

13. Managing Minesoil Development for Productive Reclaimed Lands
(W. SCHAFER)
14. Reclamation Monitoring: The Critical Elements of a Reclamation Monitoring Program
(R.L. JOHNSON, P.J. BURTON, V. KLASSEN,
P.D. LULMAN, D.R. DORAM)
15. Plains Hydrology and Reclamation Project: Results of Five Years Study
(S.R. MORAN, M.R. TRUDELL,
A. MASLOWSKI-SCHUTZE, A.E. HOWARD,
T.M. MACYK, E.I. WALLICK)
16. Highvale Soil Reconstruction Reclamation Research Program
(M.M. BOEHM, V.E. KLASSEN, L.A. PANEK)
17. Battle River Soil Reconstruction Project: Results Three Years After Construction
(L.A. LESKIW)
18. Gas Research Institute Pipeline Right of Way Research Activities
(C.A. CAHILL, R.P. CARTER)
19. Subsoiling to Mitigate Compaction on the North Bay Shortcut Project
(W.H. WATT)
20. Effects of Time and Grazing Regime on Revegetation of Native Range After Pipeline Installation
(M.A. NAETH, A.W. BAILEY)
21. Revegetation Monitoring of the Alaska Highway Gas Pipeline Prebuild
(R. HERMESH)
22. Post-Mining Groundwater Chemistry and the Effects of In-Pit Coal Ash Disposal
(M.R. TRUDELL, D. CHEEL, S.R. MORAN)
23. Assessment of Horizontal and Vertical Permeability and Vertical Flow Rates for the Rosebud - McKay Interburden, Colstrip, Montana
(P. NORBECK)
24. Accumulation of Metals and Radium - 226 by Water Sedge Growing on Uranium Mill Tailings in Northern Saskatchewan
(F.T. FRANKLING, R.E. REDMANN)
25. How Successful is the Sudbury (Ontario) Land Reclamation Program?
(P. BECKETT, K. WINTERHALDER, B. McILVEEN)
26. Methodology for Assessing Pre-Mine Agricultural Productivity
(T.A. ODDIE, D.R. DORAM, H.J. QUAN)
27. An Agricultural Capability Rating System for Reconstructed Soils
(T.M. MACYK)