

Alberta committed to 'greener' oil: Stelmach

Premier's speech opens Edmonton oilsands conference

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Premier Ed Stelmach gives a year-end interview to The Journal in his office at the Alberta Legislature in Edmonton on Dec. 20, 2010.

Photograph by: Brian Gavriloff , The Journal

Premier Ed Stelmach opened an Edmonton oilsands conference Wednesday with [a speech about Alberta's commitment to producing green, ethical oil.](#)

More than 300 King's University College students turned out to hear his keynote address at the school's [Oil Things Considered](#) conference, a two-day debate that will feature talks from Stelmach, federal NDP MP Linda Duncan, author Andrew Nikiforuk and others.

"We are already seeing enormous progress being made toward a greener barrel," Stelmach said. "I've been clear that we need to see more progress being made."

The speech was Stelmach's first public appearance since before Christmas. He refused to stop to speak with reporters and instead referred questions to his communications staff.

In his speech, Stelmach said rhetoric that reduces the debate over the oilsands to simple slogans "does us all an injustice."

"They ignore some basic facts that we, as responsible citizens of the world, cannot ignore. The first is that we need energy."

"Let's be clear; all the energy we use is extracted from the environment one way or another. Whether that energy comes from a mine, a pump jack, the diversion of rivers and flooding of land or the splitting of the atomic building blocks of nature, all forms of energy leave a footprint on the Earth."

He said even wind power must be transmitted long distances. He made no mention of solar power.

"The oilsands are not the demon they are sometimes made out to be," he said, explaining that "the life cycle carbon emissions" of oil from Iraq, Venezuela and Nigeria "are in the same ballpark as oilsands."

"Can anyone say those nations take their environmental and social obligations as seriously as Alberta does?"

Stelmach told the students the economic benefits of resource development for both the province and the country are “absolutely clear.”

“They flow from a place of freedom and opportunity with a culture of entrepreneurial self-reliance dating back to the pioneers who came to this land to create a better future for their children,” he said.

“The connection to the land as the source of our livelihood and hope runs deep through Alberta’s culture. So does the commitment to protect our land, air and water.”

At the conference, students at King’s University College are being asked to look at Alberta’s oilsands from different perspectives.

Andrew Nikiforuk was one of half-a-dozen speakers on the first day of the school’s semi-annual Interdisciplinary Studies Conference.

Melody Lepine, director of Mikisew Cree First Nation, also spoke Wednesday.

The conference, which concludes Thursday afternoon, has been a regular event for King’s students since 2008. Scheduled classes are cancelled and students are required to attend and write a paper on what they hear at the conferences.

They receive 0.5 credits for each submission and need three IS Conference credits to graduate.

“Our hope is that students can look at this entire debate and figure out the underlying values and assumptions behind all the viewpoints,” said Ken Schwanke, the school’s director of marketing.

He also said students should look beyond oilsands issues to see what each argument is ignoring.

“We want students to listen to different perspectives and be able to see through the rhetoric.”

“Our school is more liberally conscious, and reveals issues that people don’t know a lot about,” said student Michael van den Ham.

Stelmach briefly talked about Alberta’s vision for oilsands development and called it a blessing. Nikiforuk later responded by saying the province’s oilsands could be a curse if they’re not managed properly.

Nikiforuk emphasized that all Albertans are oilsands owners.

“We’re not only consumers of this resource, but owners of this resource. Our future depends on it,” he said.

Lepine spoke about the negative environmental impact the oilsands are having on Mikisew Cree First Nation.

“This is a different type of assimilation we are being forced into,” she said describing how her fellow Cree and Dene feel about how the oilsands have infringed on their traditional rights.

First-year science student Adriana Fernandez said the conference is eye-opening and “helping me become more passionate about these issues.”

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