

Bitumount

TEACHER GUIDE

Canadian Press reporter Bob Weber takes a look at the development of the Alberta oilsands and how they affected the development of not only the province, but Canada as a whole. The industry’s story began in the mid-1920s, when an entrepreneur bought rights to mine the huge deposits of tarry black goo along the Athabasca River in northern Alberta. Nobody was quite sure what to do with it. Surface roads? Fill therapeutic baths? But right from the start, it was used to produce oil. Bitumen was boiled in huge vats to produce a few barrels a day. That’s still the basic idea behind today’s huge, high-tech plants.

Eventually, the industry boomed and investment gushed into Alberta — more than \$30 billion annually for years. That money built a province confident enough to shoulder its way to the forefront in Confederation, with successive Alberta governments unafraid to take on the feds whenever it suited them. Money poured into the oilsands boomtown of Fort McMurray and the industry’s Calgary hometown. Canadians from Newfoundland oilworkers to Ontario manufacturers benefitted as well, while environmentalists wondered about impacts on forests, rivers and the Earth’s climate. Now, with low oil prices, questions beset the industry and the country that has grown to depend on it. Can Alberta — and Canada — find a way to generate the cash and the jobs that once flowed from bitumen?

Additional discussion/research points:

- What were some of the original uses for bitumen?
- How many oilsands projects are there now and how big are they?
- What are some of the jobs in your community that depend on the energy industry?
- What are some of the environmental concerns the oilsands have caused?
- What are the climate change impacts of oil from the oilsands compared to conventional oil?
- What are some of the ways industry is trying to reduce its environmental impact?
- Should Canada try to move away from fossil fuels or should we keep expanding the industry?
- What can your family do to reduce its use of fossil fuels?



Alberta’s first oilsands operation called Bitumount.



Power house facility at historic Bitumount oil sands mining, separating and refining facility.



A power house at historic Bitumount oil sands mining, separating and refining facility in Fort McMurray Alta, on Tuesday October 5, 2016. Between 1925 and 1958, Bitumount was the site of experimental oil sands separation plants and was designated a Provincial Historic Resource in 1974. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jason Franson