THE TERROR OF THE TAR SANDS

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A children's mystery novel, *The Terror of the Tar Sands* written in the 1960s, focuses on unaccounted for events when nuclear energy was secretly and fictionally used to develop the oil sands deposits in northern Alberta. Today, such a title evokes images of those opposing oil sands development in general and in particular the proposed construction of pipelines to transport Alberta's synthetic crude oil or bitumen to foreign markets. These proposed pipelines when completed will carry products from Alberta's oil sands to American refineries on the Gulf Coast or to Asian markets via the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific coast. Contemporary rhetoric creates fear in the minds of those unfamiliar with today's vital energy industry as it puts on hold construction jobs and the economic hopes of thousands. The media and those opposing oil sands development constantly refer to Alberta's oil sands as *tar sands,* a technically incorrect term. One hundred years ago this term was quite acceptable when the first pioneers to develop the oil sands did not have to face angry protestors, scrutiny by environmentalists or indecisions by aspiring politicians.

However, the oil sands pioneers fearlessly tackled challenges and struggles that are not unlike those of today's developers. These include transporting workers and supplies to and from a remote region, working within the narrow confines of government regulations, dealing with restrictions imposed by severe winter weather, hiring reliable and competent workers, providing appropriate housing, as well as the most formidable of all – developing suitable technology to extract the oil.

The technological challenge has been largely overcome; but in the process, it was originally hampered by a lack of understanding of the geological and chemical nature of the deposits. Unlike conventional oil, the oil sands deposits are visible and cover tens of thousands of square miles, yet they are physically and chemically different from other known petroleum fields. These differences were gradually recognized as early geologists and developers searched for specific words to describe what today are appropriately called the oil sands.

This paper traces the historical evolution of the nomenclature from tar sands to oil sands to define and to describe the Alberta deposits. Based upon the physical appearance of the softened oil sands seeping into the river, while not understanding its chemical composition, *tar-sands* became the first term to be universally accepted.

Today, those opposing the industry use this term as a pejorative to bring discredit to an industry that is so vital to our global needs. The Canadian government, when it officially, but incorrectly, labeled the Alberta deposits *tar-sands* one hundred years ago, never envisioned the controversy that this term would create today.