

Green issues top Alberta oilsands concerns

BY DAN HEALING, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 6, 2010

The most pressing business challenges in the Alberta oilsands are the same as the ones environmentalists have identified, says the head of one of the biggest engineering firms in the world.

Solving those questions concerning energy and water use, as well as greenhouse gas and other emissions, is essential to establishing a sustainable industry, said Samir Brikho, chief executive of AMEC PLC.

"As even the reserves here in Canada will eventually be exhausted, transforming Canada into a clean energy powerhouse is not a small ambition," he said during a presentation to the Energy Roundtable conference Tuesday in Calgary.

AMEC, based in the U.K., has its biggest foreign presence in Canada, which accounts for a third of its annual \$3.5 billion in revenue. Brikho said the company has done work for all but one of Canada's 12 major oilsands extraction facilities.

In a later interview, he said engineers are tackling myriad optimization questions, many of which will improve the carbon and environmental footprint of the oilsands.

"There have been a lot of discussions whether it is it wise to burn natural gas to produce oil," he said, noting panel discussion on the possibility of using nuclear reactors for the operations around Fort

McMurray.

"I think the biggest change is going to be in changing the processes in actually mining and in getting the oil out of the sands. If we were able to move on some of these processes, we will be able to save a lot of energy," he said.

He said nuclear power is a possible solution but not the only one.

In earlier panel discussions, Dawn Farrell, chief operating officer for TransAlta Corp., said nuclear power has become far too expensive and the regulatory burden too onerous.

But David Keith, director of the University of Calgary's Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy, said nuclear energy is an option that could fit in well with Alberta's expertise in building big-capital energy projects.

"There's an opportunity to do it here . . . this town needs to think hard about how to use all the skills we have to win when . . . there are serious regulations on carbon," he said.

He said his theory is that capital available for investment in the oilsands will dry up sometime after 2020 as the world moves to punish big emitters of carbon dioxide.

dhealing@calgaryherald.com