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Alberta atlas offers hope as well as grim tidings

By Hanneke Brooymans, Edmonton Journal April 2, 2009

A new Alberta atlas project shows in great detail how quickly industrial development is cutting into the province's remaining boreal forests, but also offers some hope.

The atlas, to be released today, has 118 maps detailing everything from industry leases on the land to grizzly bear distribution. (The online version is free and can be accessed at www.globalforestwatch.ca)

A "dual conclusion" results from the findings, says Peter Lee, executive director of Global Forest Watch Canada, the non-profit group that created the atlas. "The first one is that the pace and scale of industrial development is so dramatic as to be almost mind blowing over the last 25 years or so. The second one is . . . there are still some very significant ecologically intact forests left in Alberta."

That means there's still a tremendous opportunity for improved conservation and stewardship of forest resources, he says.

The atlas was created now because the provincial government is preparing a land-use framework plan.

Lee notes between 2005 and 2008, the area of leases for in situ oilsands development (accessed by wells) doubled and now covers 10 per cent of the province. Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers vice-president of communications Roman Cooney says all land will be reclaimed.

Meanwhile, the annual area logged in Alberta in 2007 was 3.8 times the area logged in 1975. The Alberta Forest Products Association didn't dispute that number.