

Conservation and Reclamation INFORMATION LETTER

Wellsite Reclamation Update for 2001

BACKGROUND

This Information Letter provides guidance on the wellsite reclamation and certification process for the 2001 field season.

Due to the increasing number of applications we are looking for ways to focus our efforts and to speed up the certification process, both in the office and field.

We also identify some technical issues that arose over the 2000 field season and our views on them.

The Reclamation Criteria for Wellsites and Associated Facilities – 1995 Update is still in effect for the 2001 field season but there is a new application form (see C&R/IL/01-3).

CERTIFICATION PROCESS ISSUES

Applications for Associated Facilities

Please indicate the well name and EUB license number on the covering letter with your application NOT on the application form itself when you are applying only for an associated facility (e.g., remote sump, camp site, borrow pit, etc.). Indicate the MSL and LOC for public land sites on the application form. Please also indicate on the covering letter anything unusual about the application. This will save us time by ensuring we enter only the necessary information into our database.

When applying for the well and associated facilities together, please put all the information on the application form.

Applications for wells and access roads on public land must include any associated facilities. Applications for the associated facilities can be accepted separate from the wellsite and access road prior to certification of the well and access.

Separate Applications for Access Road and Wellsite

We will not accept applications for access roads and wellsites separately. The exception to this is if the access road serves another well or other specified land. If, following an inquiry, the wellsite passes but the access road does not (or the reverse), we will refuse to issue a certificate for the whole site. Only the portion that fails will have to be re-assessed prior to re-application.

Application Content Reminders

- Outline or colour plans in yellow showing ALL the areas applied for. This includes areas that have a release.
- Ensure the applicant's name is the Registered Corporate Legal Name. Do not abbreviate.
- All parties registered on the title must sign releases (private land only).
- Provide current landowner names, addresses and phone numbers. It takes a lot of time to set up inquiries if these are wrong. Operators may be requested to provide updated names and numbers at the time the inquiry is being set up (private land only).

- An application is considered administratively incomplete and will be refused if there is no indication that the landowner was contacted prior to application or if they do not receive a copy of the application. Proof of a reasonable attempt by the operator can be described and submitted with an application. If landowners have no comment then the application should state that.
- An operator can answer yes/no questions with other responses but these are subject to evaluation by the inspector.

Overlapping Activities Exemption

Use the same survey plan when applying for the overlapping certificate exemption as is used for the certificate application. **On the exemption application survey plan**, show the areas being exempted in yellow. Provide three (3) copies of the plans with the exemption form.

On the certificate application survey plan, outline or colour the areas to be certified in yellow but DO NOT include the areas being exempted.

Use the revised overlapping certificate exemption form on the web site in C&R IL 97-6. Overlapping exemptions (for private land) should be sent to Science and Standards Division for processing.

N/A's in Part III of Application

The Application Form states that wells constructed after April 30, 1994 are expected to provide **all the available information required** in Part III – Site History. Many applications are still coming in with N/A's in this section.

We recognize that operators may not have this information as a result of the numerous acquisitions that have happened. We also know that some of the required information is easily available through external sources such as EUB records and air photos. Finally, we recognize that some of the required information is not applicable in all cases.

Therefore, operators are required to:

- Make every effort to locate the required information in internal records and from external sources (e.g., the EUB, air photos).
- Clearly identify if N/A means Not Available or Not Applicable.
- Identify the reason the information is Not Available.
- Ensure that there are no inconsistencies in the information that is supplied (e.g., Sump Backfill Date N/A but Ground Conditions Dry).

Operators must understand that inspectors will have to spend more time on a lease where information is lacking than on one where all the information is available. This extra time reduces the number of inquiries that can be held in a season.

Detailed Site Assessment Diagrams

The diagram should clearly indicate: controls, well centre, sump, flare pit, access point entry and tank storage location. **Ensure that well centre is located in the centre of a grid or is sampled and reported as a separate point.**

The wellsite grid diagram should begin with number one in the bottom right hand corner. Each grid should contain the topsoil depth, and texture plus any anomalies. A comment page should be used to further describe the lease, explain any anomalies, and to provide additional information that is relevant.

Operators should look at C&R/IL/01-7 *Standard Detailed Site Assessment Forms for Wellsite Certification* for more information on the detailed site assessment.

Releases

A release is a written acknowledgement that the operator and the landowner/land

<http://www.gov.ab.ca/env/protenf/landrec/index.html>

manager have spoken and made an agreement about an improvement being left on site. This inspector may accept this agreement if the “improvements” are legitimate and logical. If the improvements are not legitimate or logical, or if they pose a potential environmental risk, the agreement will not be accepted and the site will not be certified.

Justifications

If you indicate that a site fails certain parameters please provide written justification for the failure. Do not wait to explain it at the inquiry. We will refuse to accept applications where failures are noted but no justification is provided.

Survey and Stake Well Centre

Inspectors would appreciate it if operators could survey and stake well centre prior to the inquiry. This will save significant time at the inquiry.

Undisturbed Portions of Site and Access

Full assessments may not be required on undisturbed portions of a site. Operators should indicate clearly what portions of the site have not been disturbed, or if disturbed, have not been affected by operation activities. The application should include records, observations, soil and vegetation assessments (including roots) that support the no-impact assertion. Trails or roads where soil has not been actively moved from one location to another, may still be impacted by traffic, causing compaction.

Existing Trails

Existing trails need not be reclaimed if the trail existed prior to the operator entering the land and if the operator’s activities have not caused further impacts. The operator must provide evidence that the trail existed prior to development (e.g., landowner statement, shown on original survey plan, or air photo prior to drilling) and the landowner must indicate acceptance of the trail.

Any rutting, erosion or compaction caused by the operation must be reclaimed to meet criteria, using pre-site or a representative control on a portion of

trail not associated with wellsite operations.

If the land adjacent to the original trail has been disturbed (e.g., trail has been widened at corners) then the disturbed area must be reclaimed and assessed or the landowner must provide a release for the wider trail.

If the trail has been upgraded to a road that is being left in place then the landowner must sign a release for the road.

If the Site Does Not Meet Criteria, Withdraw Your Application before the Inquiry

Some operators have been proactive in visiting the site before the scheduled inquiry date. If this visit reveals significant changes in site conditions since their assessment and application was made that may result in a refusal to issue a reclamation certificate, operators have been withdrawing their application. We encourage this practice as it ensures that inspectors are devoting time to certifiable sites.

Power Lines

Power lines are considered to be an associated facility and must be removed prior to certification. Where the line is required for other uses (e.g., another wellsite, another industrial activity, landowner) then another party must obtain a surface lease/disposition for the line prior to certification. If the other activity is also specified land then an overlapping exemption form should be used. Operators should discuss responsibility for removal and reclamation of the lines with the electric utility company prior to applying for a reclamation certificate.

Green Area Audit

Some regional offices in the Green Area have identified weeds as a significant concern on sites being submitted by industry as certifiable. Some of the regions are considering assessing sites in certain areas of their region prior to issuing the certificate. Operators may wish to consult with the regional offices to determine which offices have these concerns.

CERTIFICATION TECHNICAL ISSUES

Use of Manure and Other Amendments

Manure and other amendments (e.g., gypsum, straw, peat) can provide physical, biological and nutrient improvements to soils. It is generally recognized that these improvements are more beneficial in the short-term rather than long-term.

If manure or other amendments are applied to the site and the controls at the same rates and the same time, then a proper assessment (comparison of site and control) can be conducted. However, we have found sites where the vegetation appears to be significantly better on a site with manure added than off-site controls without manure. This raises concerns with respect to the long-term performance of the site.

We do not wish to discourage the application of manure (other than on prairie) or other amendments to sites, but we need to ensure the site will perform over the long-term. The vegetation criteria in the *Reclamation Criteria for Wellsites and Associated Facilities – 1995 Update* require that the site and controls be under similar management inputs.

Therefore, to make the inspector's job easier, we ask the following:

- Where amendments are added to improve soil quality (and controls are not similarly amended), physical and chemical properties of the amendments should be assessed prior to placement. Soil quality deficiencies and amendment properties should be reported in the application for the inspector's information.
- Where possible, conduct soil and vegetation assessments prior to amendment application when the controls are not going to be similarly amended. This allows the inspector to review an assessment that compares site and control under similar management inputs.
- Complete the vegetation assessment a minimum of two (2) years after amendment application. This coincides with the two-year waiting period for fertilizer inputs to forages and the other non-cultivated criteria

(It also extends the original position set out in C&R/IL/96-2 which indicated that where distinct fertilizer effects were evident, the inspector may request a longer waiting period).

The inspector may adjourn the inquiry and request a soil nutrient analysis on the site and the controls. This will help to determine if the nutrient levels on the site are significantly above the control levels and unreasonably affecting vegetation performance and normal management practices.

Note that manure is not allowed on native prairie on White Area public land sites.

Added Topsoil

Landowners may be interested in knowing the properties of any topsoil added to a wellsite. Added topsoil should be described (e.g., source, texture, volume, etc.) and should be similar to control topsoil.

Soil Profile Assessment

Process restrictions anywhere within the soil profile (top metre) may cause an adverse effect. If you want to conduct a more detailed assessment, more information about describing and assessing soil profile structure can be found in the following: *RRTAC 93-13, CanSIS 1983 (The Canada Soil Information System), or USDA 1998 (Field Book for Describing and Sampling Soils)*.

Contamination

In 2000, 12 sites (approximately 10% of failed sites) were refused due to contamination. If inspectors find a potential problem (e.g., adverse effects possibly due to contamination), as part of their normal inquiry process (see C&R/IL/99-4) they will refuse to issue the certificate or adjourn the inquiry. The operator will be required to collect and analyze samples to determine if there is a contaminant problem.

If a problem is confirmed, the inspector will refuse to issue the certificate and the company must remediate the site to acceptable levels (Alberta Tier I Criteria or other relevant criteria such as CCME or new Canada Wide Standards). **Soil**

analysis documentation (before and after if remediation is done) must be submitted for review by the appropriate specialists.

Certification does not imply that a site is free from contamination. Operators continue to maintain liability for any contamination resulting from the well-site operation.

Burial of Brush and Trees

Buried brush and trees may lead to decomposition, subsidence and generation of methane gas. On May 1, 1980 (*Minimum Reclamation Standards for Patented Lands*) and again in May, 1982 (*Minimum Reclamation Requirements for Public and Private Lands in Alberta*), Alberta Environment required that **all trees should be salvaged or removed and disposed of by burning or other methods as approved by the Council.** Therefore burial of brush and trees is not allowed. An exception will be made for the remnants of burn piles.

If there is a disagreement between parties as to whether or not brush or trees were buried on a site, the operator will be asked to provide a written declaration that brush and trees were not buried on the site.

Vegetation Data

All applications must include vegetation data, collected according to the Criteria. Do not submit an application without data on the assumption that vegetation will be fine at the inquiry. We will refuse to accept applications without vegetation data.

Density (plants/unit area) should only be used where:

- the control consists of young or grazed/hayed stands of native or tame forage grass/forbs
- stubble is being assessed; or,
- shrubs and trees have been planted.

Height is not applicable for grass/forb stands; it may have value for determining relative age of shrubs/trees.

On public land, it is expected that native species will not be fertilized unless the inspector gives approval. Fertilizer use

must be documented in the Detailed Site Assessment Report.

Fences in Grazing Areas

Fences in grazing areas are often left in place to allow vegetation to establish. We are finding too many cases where the operator and landowner are requesting that the fence remain in place until after the inquiry but no release is provided with the application, or one is promised at the inquiry but is not provided. **Applications where fences will be in place at the inquiry MUST be accompanied by a signed release or they will be treated as incomplete.**

We are concerned about the sustainability of vegetation following fence removal. Though not a requirement at this time, we prefer that fences be removed prior to the inquiry. We will continue to monitor performance of grazing sites after fence removal (on a complaint basis) and if this becomes an issue we will require fence removal prior to certification.

RECLAMATION ISSUES

Storage of Topsoil in Pits

Some operators are burying topsoil in pits as a means of storage. We have concerns about the quality of topsoil resulting from this method. We also have concerns about the ability to track storage locations, particularly if the property is sold. **Therefore this method of topsoil storage is not allowed.**

Drilling Waste Compost

Some operators are composting drilling wastes (e.g., biopiles) and hope to use them as amendments on wellsites. This is not yet a proven method and operators are cautioned about the chemistry, texture and sustainability of these materials. Proposed use of any composted drilling waste material must be referred to the reclamation inspector for evaluation prior to use.

CONTACTS

The following can be reached toll free by calling 310-0000 and then dialing the number shown below.

For Green Area public lands:

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Public Lands Division,
3rd Floor, 9915 - 108 Street,
EDMONTON, Alberta T5K 2G8.

Phone: (780) 427-3570

Fax: (780) 422-4251

e-mail reclaim@env.gov.ab.ca

For White Area public lands:

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Public Lands Division,
Room 200, J. G. O'Donoghue Building,
7000 - 113 Street,
EDMONTON, Alberta T6H 5T6.

Phone: (780) 427-6597

Fax: (780) 422-4244

Website: www.gov.ab.ca/navigation/sustain/publiclands/index.html

For all other lands:

Alberta Environment,
Science and Standards Division,
4th Floor, 9820-106 Street,
EDMONTON, Alberta T5K 2J6

Phone: (780) 427-5883

Fax: (780) 422-4192

e-mail: land.management@gov.ab.ca