The Mildred Lake Extension (MLX) is an exciting project that will sustain Syncrude’s current production levels by extending the life of our North Mine. It received regulatory approval in 2019 and is expected to mine first ore by 2026.

The MLX pre-mining work started in the fall of 2019. After many factors were taken into consideration, Syncrude decided to slow the pace of development following the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

Leading up to that point, a significant amount of work had already been initiated to create an access road, as well as fish rescue, dewatering, and tree clearing.

“Syncrude is pleased to have resumed work as of January 2021,” says Sylvia Skinner, Regulatory Advisor, Regulatory & Lease Development. “Preparations are underway to begin building a temporary bridge to cross the MacKay River needed in order to access the MLX (west) expansion area with our equipment. Our goal is to have it finished by fall 2021, so we can then start working on the approaches for the permanent bridge on the west side.”

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MLX UPDATE

Once the permanent bridge is completed, the temporary bridge will be removed.

Doug Webb, Community Business Coordinator, is proud to see so many Indigenous contractor companies working on the project. “We set the strategic goal to hire local Indigenous contractors for the pre-work at MLX. With the exception of the temporary bridge build, the rest of the current work is in fact being done by local Indigenous companies,” says Doug.

With work on MLX having started up again, Syncrude’s Community Relations Team has been busy holding virtual community advisory groups to keep neighbouring Indigenous communities engaged and informed on the work being done. “It’s been great to connect with different Indigenous communities and give them the opportunity to ask questions. Part of our ongoing efforts to be a good neighbour,” says Mel Boostrom, Stakeholder Relations Specialist, Community Relations.

For more information on Syncrude’s MLX project, visit https://www.syncrude.ca/our-company/mlx-project/ or contact Public Affairs: publicaffairs@syncrude.com.
Local residents participated in producing another edition of Pathways magazine, an annual Syncrude publication that celebrates the achievements and inspiring stories of Indigenous people in Canada. Audrey Redcrow and Mitch Mercredi were among those interviewed and photographed for the cover story of the magazine that features the Art of Powwow.

“It’s the most beautiful feeling in the world when you get on that floor,” Audrey says in an interview with the magazine. As a ladies jingle and fancy dancer, the power of spirit, prayer and healing is an integral part of how Audrey dances.

Inspiring stories like these can be found in Syncrude’s Pathways 2020/21 magazine. It captures the journeys, achievements, connections, contributions and efforts of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples — and brings light to Indigenous culture, history and traditions.

Mitch, who grew up in Fort Chipewyan, says traditions like the powwow were not initially part of his life. But then, as a teenager, he attended a cultural rediscovery event that sparked his imagination and inspired him to learn more about his people’s traditional ways of life. As a young adult, Mitch’s fascination led him to join his first drum group. From there, he explored further aspects of his culture and soon found his calling in powwow.

All three of his children now dance in the powwow and he and his wife, Crystal, are raising them to be proud and embrace their culture.

Kara Flynn, VP, Government and Public Affairs, say providing a platform to share perspectives and lived experiences is a vital part of Syncrude's commitment to Indigenous communities. “Indigenous people contribute in a major way to our company’s success. The relationships we have built create more resilience in our business, in our region’s communities, and in our ongoing reclamation efforts.”

To check out the online edition of the magazine go to https://www.syncrude.ca/newsroom/pathways-magazine/
PROJECT GRYPHON ONGOING AT SYNCRUDE

The onset of spring brought the annual Syncrude Turnaround called Project Gryphon. The massive maintenance event began pre-turnaround work in late March, with mechanical work commencing in early April.

Project Gryphon is a turnaround event on Syncrude’s 8-3 Coker and associated process units.

Strong focus on COVID-19 protocols are being implemented at the sites. All workers are expected to adhere to these while working on sites. They are in place for your safety as well as the health and well-being of other Syncrude workers and neighbouring communities. These measures include: daily AHS self-assessment requirement prior to arriving to the worksite; physical distancing protocol; wearing of masks and/or use of other personal barriers; additional COVID-19 guidelines; and established self-isolation protocols.

Syncrude leaders are expecting to complete 2021 Project Gryphon scope safely and effectively with the support of the building trades unions and professional skilled tradespeople.

LET’S BUILD SOMETHING.

For more than 50 years, Syncrude has been one of Canada’s most trusted, stable and reliable companies, and North America’s most respected oil sands operator.

More than 2,000 craft personnel are required to execute the project. Craft personnel will be working 10-hour shifts, while those supporting the critical path will be on 12-hour shifts.
Indigenous voices providing Indigenous solutions. That is the intent behind the Stollery Children’s Hospital Awasisak Program – the only pediatric specific Indigenous health care program in all of Canada.

Gaps in services in rural and remote Indigenous communities led to the program’s creation.

Sherri Di Lallo, Manager and Team Lead for Awasisak, is thrilled to spearhead the important work her team is doing: “The program is a unique example of honoring and implementing the Truth and Reconciliation recommendations to improve health care access through community engagement and consultation.” The program’s name Awasisak, meaning “children” in Cree, was chosen by an Elder.

The Awasisak team provides a culturally-safe experience to help Indigenous families navigate the health care system. “We welcome families upon arrival to the Stollery and work with their health care team to create a follow-up plan for the patient after they’ve been discharged from the hospital,” says Sherri.

Sherri and her team have travelled to Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, Conklin and Janvier, hosting Talking Circles to consult with community members and Elders. “The Talking Circles help reduce perceived barriers, marginalization and lack of information about services, clinics, physicians and programs of the child health systems.”

The Talking Circles help the Awasisak team understand the health care support needed in each community.
AWASISAK PROGRAM CONTINUED

“We heard that further support is required for kids with complex needs in many northern communities. As a result, we’re developing an Outreach Team to care for those children. Ideally, the team will include psychotherapists, speech language pathologists, physiotherapists, audiologists, to name a few,” says Sherri.

In addition to Talking Circles, the Awasisak team also supports Teddy Bear and Community Wellness Fairs throughout the province. COVID-19 restrictions have postponed those events, but virtual programs have been offered in their place. The team looks forward to resuming their regular activities when it’s safe to do so. As the sponsor of the Program, Syncrude, is committed to increasing capacity for its Indigenous neighbours through education and community initiatives.

“We are pleased to support a program committed to the improvement of Indigenous children through specialized acute health care and community outreach. We look forward to seeing the continued great work performed by the Awasisak team in northern Alberta’s Indigenous communities,” says Kara Flynn, Vice President of Government and Public Affairs, Syncrude.

Sherri recognizes the support of sponsors is vital for her team’s work. “We are grateful for the support of health care leaders, the communities we work with and donors such as Syncrude. As a result, our goal for communities to feel heard and supported is made possible.”
Due to the nature and timing of mine material movement and use, the overburden that was removed to initiate the pit is reclaimed as soon as practical on Syncrude’s site. This is part of our commitment to progressive reclamation and meeting our goal of minimizing the effect of disturbance.

But, why pit lakes? Surface mining results in large pits that must be reclaimed. Some mine pits are filled with mine materials such as overburden or tailings to form a solid surface, which is then reclaimed to forests and wetlands. Other mine pits are reclaimed to lakes.

However, this leaves insufficient material available to fill one or more of the mine pits at the completion of mining. These pits may be partially or fully filled with water (mine and/or fresh water) and reclaimed as a lake (pit lake). Pit lakes reduce the need for material re-handling, which would result in increased emissions from material transportation (such as greenhouse gases or nitrogen oxides), lengthen reclamation timelines and success, and increased costs.

WHEN A LAKE IS MORE THAN A LAKE

When Rochelle Young first started working at Syncrude 20 years ago, she heard about plans to turn the west in-pit tailings pond into a lake. “I remember wondering, ‘How is that actually possible? I was working as an environmental scientist and it was hard to imagine.”

Today, Rochelle works as a Regulatory Affairs Advisor and that tailings pond is now Base Mine Lake, an eight-square-kilometre pit lake that borders Highway 63 to the west as you travel south from the Mildred Lake site.

Syncrude stopped using it as a tailings facility close to 10 years ago – on Dec. 31, 2012.

The lake now plays a critical role in Syncrude’s reclaimed landscape as the first commercial-scale demonstration of water-capped tailings technology and the oil sands industry’s first pit lake.

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Petroleum Coke Water Demonstration

Syncrude’s is once again testing our full-scale petroleum coke water demonstration this summer. After sitting idle for a year, the team is excited to get the construction and prep work completed before turning on the taps.

After 14 years of research, Syncrude contracted one of the region’s leading Aboriginal businesses, The Bouchier Group, to complete civil work for the project. Construction of the pilot project began in 2017. They are now back on-site to assist with this year’s commissioning.

“The treatment principles behind this technology are similar to a home water filter using activated carbon. Mine water treated by our petroleum coke technology removes suspended solids such as clay, as well as hydrocarbons and dissolved organic compounds, including naphthenic acids. Research to date shows the treated water will support aquatic life and protect downstream uses,” says Warren Zubot, Senior Engineering Associate who has led the research on the technology.

This project will return treated water to the Mildred Lake Settling Basin, a tailings facility and one of our main source of recycled water. The closed circuit testing at the demonstration project will provide additional insight and confirm former research whether the quality of the treated water is suitable for return to the Athabasca River based on established environmental guidelines.

Syncrude is engaging with Indigenous communities and other regional stakeholders, so they’re fully informed about the project, the technology and the promising results we’ve achieved to date, as well as having the opportunity to provide thoughts and feedback.

“We hope to be able to invite local communities on site this summer to see the demonstration in action, however COVID-19 restrictions may impact our schedule,” says Cliff Dimm, Manager of Community Relations. “If we are unable to meet face-to-face, we have plans to utilize other communication channels to inform. Stay tuned for more information about our engagement activities scheduled for 2021.”