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*Environmental Specialist Since 1974*



# REGIONAL AQUATICS MONITORING

*in support of the*

## JOINT OIL SANDS MONITORING PLAN

Final 2015 Program Report

**April 2016**

*Prepared for:*

**Alberta Environmental Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Agency (AEMERA)**  
Edmonton, Alberta



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*Prepared for:*

**ALBERTA ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING,  
EVALUATION AND REPORTING AGENCY**

*Prepared by:*

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*and* WESTERN RESOURCE SOLUTIONS**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>xxxiii</b>
<b>LIST OF APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>liii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>liv</b>
<b>2015 IMPLEMENTATION TEAM .....</b>	<b>lv</b>
<b>AMENDMENT RECORD .....</b>	<b>lvi</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>lvii</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1-1</b>
<b>1.1 MONITORING OBJECTIVES .....</b>	<b>1-2</b>
1.1.1 Overall Monitoring Objectives of the JOSMP .....	1-2
1.1.2 Aquatic Monitoring Objectives .....	1-2
<b>1.2 BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>1-2</b>
<b>1.3 STUDY AREA .....</b>	<b>1-4</b>
<b>1.4 GENERAL MONITORING AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH .....</b>	<b>1-9</b>
1.4.1 Overall Monitoring Approach .....	1-9
1.4.2 Monitoring Components.....	1-10
1.4.3 Definition of Terms.....	1-13
1.4.4 Overall Analytical Approach for 2015 .....	1-13
<b>1.5 ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT.....</b>	<b>1-18</b>
<b>2.0 SUMMARY OF OIL SANDS PROJECT ACTIVITIES IN 2015 .....</b>	<b>2-1</b>
<b>2.1 DEVELOPMENT STATUS OF OIL SANDS PROJECTS.....</b>	<b>2-1</b>
<b>2.2 WATER USE RELATED TO OIL SANDS PROJECTS IN 2015 .....</b>	<b>2-1</b>
<b>2.3 LAND CHANGE AS OF 2015 RELATED TO OIL SANDS ACTIVITIES.....</b>	<b>2-11</b>
<b>3.0 MONITORING ACTIVITIES FOR THE 2015 PROGRAM.....</b>	<b>3-1</b>
<b>3.1 FIELD DATA COLLECTION.....</b>	<b>3-1</b>
3.1.1 Climate and Hydrology Monitoring Component .....	3-1
3.1.2 Water Quality Monitoring Component.....	3-25
3.1.3 Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	3-53
3.1.4 Fish Populations Component.....	3-77
3.1.5 Acid-Sensitive Lakes Component.....	3-91
<b>3.2 ANALYTICAL APPROACH .....</b>	<b>3-98</b>
3.2.1 Climate and Hydrology Monitoring Component .....	3-98
3.2.2 Water Quality Component .....	3-101
3.2.3 Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	3-116
3.2.4 Fish Populations Component.....	3-126



3.2.5	Acid-Sensitive Lakes Component.....	3-139
<b>4.0</b>	<b>CLIMATE AND HYDROLOGIC CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ATHABASCA OIL SANDS REGION IN 2015.....</b>	<b>4-1</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION .....	4-1
4.2	CLIMATE CHARACTERIZATION .....	4-1
4.2.1	Air Temperature .....	4-2
4.2.2	Precipitation .....	4-3
4.2.3	Snowpack .....	4-6
4.3	HYDROLOGIC CHARACTERIZATION .....	4-8
4.3.1	Athabasca River .....	4-9
4.3.2	Muskeg River .....	4-11
4.3.3	MacKay River .....	4-13
4.3.4	Christina River .....	4-15
4.4	SUMMARY .....	4-17
<b>5.0</b>	<b>2015 MONITORING RESULTS .....</b>	<b>5-1</b>
5.1	ATHABASCA RIVER AND ATHABASCA RIVER DELTA .....	5-3
5.1.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-8
5.1.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-9
5.1.3	Water Quality .....	5-11
5.1.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-13
5.1.5	Fish Populations .....	5-20
5.2	MUSKEG RIVER WATERSHED.....	5-91
5.2.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-96
5.2.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-98
5.2.3	Water Quality .....	5-101
5.2.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-105
5.2.5	Fish Populations .....	5-114
5.3	STEEP BANK RIVER WATERSHED .....	5-212
5.3.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-214
5.3.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-215
5.3.3	Water Quality .....	5-216
5.3.4	Fish Populations .....	5-219
5.4	TAR RIVER WATERSHED .....	5-242
5.4.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-244
5.4.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-246
5.4.3	Water Quality .....	5-247
5.4.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-249
5.4.5	Fish Populations .....	5-252
5.5	MACKAY RIVER WATERSHED.....	5-282
5.5.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-285
5.5.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-286

5.5.3	Water Quality .....	5-287
5.5.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-290
5.5.5	Fish Populations .....	5-291
<b>5.6</b>	<b>CALUMET RIVER WATERSHED .....</b>	<b>5-342</b>
5.6.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-344
5.6.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-345
5.6.3	Water Quality .....	5-347
5.6.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-348
<b>5.7</b>	<b>FIREBAG RIVER WATERSHED .....</b>	<b>5-376</b>
5.7.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-378
5.7.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-380
5.7.3	Water Quality .....	5-382
5.7.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-384
<b>5.8</b>	<b>ELLS RIVER WATERSHED .....</b>	<b>5-432</b>
5.8.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-435
5.8.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-436
5.8.3	Water Quality .....	5-438
5.8.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-441
5.8.5	Fish Populations .....	5-446
<b>5.9</b>	<b>CLEARWATER RIVER WATERSHED.....</b>	<b>5-508</b>
5.9.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-510
5.9.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-511
5.9.3	Water Quality .....	5-512
5.9.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-515
<b>5.10</b>	<b>CHRISTINA RIVER WATERSHED.....</b>	<b>5-548</b>
5.10.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-552
5.10.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-555
5.10.3	Water Quality .....	5-557
5.10.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-562
5.10.5	Fish Populations .....	5-579
<b>5.11</b>	<b>HANGINGSTONE RIVER WATERSHED.....</b>	<b>5-726</b>
5.11.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-728
5.11.2	Hydrologic Conditions.....	5-729
5.11.3	Water Quality .....	5-731
5.11.4	Benthic Invertebrate Communities.....	5-733
5.11.5	Fish Populations .....	5-734
<b>5.12</b>	<b>PIERRE RIVER AREA.....</b>	<b>5-758</b>
5.12.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-761
5.12.2	Water Quality .....	5-762
5.12.3	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality .....	5-764
<b>5.13</b>	<b>MISCELLANEOUS AQUATIC SYSTEMS.....</b>	<b>5-790</b>
5.13.1	Summary of 2015 WY Conditions.....	5-793

5.13.2	Fort Creek, McLean Creek, and Horse River .....	5-796
5.13.3	Poplar Creek and Beaver River .....	5-800
5.13.4	Alice Creek .....	5-807
5.13.5	Mills Creek, Isadore's Lake.....	5-811
5.13.6	Shipyard Lake.....	5-814
<b>5.14</b>	<b>ACID-SENSITIVE LAKES.....</b>	<b>5-889</b>
5.14.1	General Characteristics of the ASL Component Lakes in the 2015 WY .....	5-889
5.14.2	Temporal Trends .....	5-891
5.14.3	Critical Loads of Acidity and Exceedances of Critical Load.....	5-893
5.14.4	Comparison of Critical Loads of Acidity to Modeled Net Potential Acid Input.....	5-894
5.14.5	Trend Analysis on Measurement Endpoints .....	5-895
5.14.6	Control Charting of ASL Measurement Endpoints in Lakes at Greatest Risk to Acidification.....	5-899
5.14.7	Classification of Results.....	5-899
<b>6.0</b>	<b>SPECIAL STUDIES .....</b>	<b>6-1</b>
<b>6.1</b>	<b>RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TURBIDITY, TOTAL SUSPENDED SOLIDS, AND DISCHARGE IN TRIBUTARIES TO THE ATHABASCA RIVER .....</b>	<b>6-1</b>
6.1.1	Initial Results from the Calibration of Continuously-Measured Turbidity to Total Suspended Solids in the JOSMP Study Area.....	6-1
6.1.2	An assessment of Uncertainty in Estimating Total Suspended Solids Loading from Computed Discharge Records in the Study Area .....	6-13
<b>6.2</b>	<b>EXPANDED FISH COMMUNITY STUDY .....</b>	<b>6-15</b>
6.2.1	Introduction .....	6-15
6.2.2	Methods.....	6-16
6.2.3	Results.....	6-23
6.2.4	Discussion and Recommendations .....	6-33
<b>6.3</b>	<b>STATUS OF FISH IN THE ATHABASCA RIVER – PILOT STUDY.....</b>	<b>6-34</b>
6.3.1	Introduction .....	6-34
6.3.2	Methods.....	6-34
6.3.3	Data Analysis.....	6-39
6.3.4	Quality Assurance/Quality Control Procedures .....	6-41
6.3.5	Results and Discussion .....	6-41
6.3.6	Conclusions .....	6-56
<b>7.0</b>	<b>SYNTHESIS OF 2015 WY RESULTS.....</b>	<b>7-1</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>CLIMATE AND HYDROLOGY.....</b>	<b>7-1</b>
<b>7.2</b>	<b>WATER QUALITY .....</b>	<b>7-6</b>
<b>7.3</b>	<b>BENTHIC INVERTEBRATE COMMUNITIES AND SEDIMENT QUALITY .....</b>	<b>7-8</b>
7.3.1	Benthic Invertebrate Communities.....	7-8

7.3.2	Sediment Quality .....	7-9
<b>7.4</b>	<b>FISH POPULATIONS .....</b>	<b>7-10</b>
<b>7.5</b>	<b>ACID-SENSITIVE LAKES.....</b>	<b>7-12</b>
<b>7.6</b>	<b>SPECIAL STUDIES .....</b>	<b>7-13</b>
7.6.1	Relationships between Turbidity, Total Suspended Solids, and Discharge in Tributaries to the Athabasca River .....	7-13
7.6.2	Expanded Fish Community Study .....	7-14
7.6.3	Status of Fish in the Athabasca River – Pilot Study .....	7-14
<b>8.0</b>	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>8-1</b>
<b>9.0</b>	<b>GLOSSARY AND LIST OF ACRONYMS .....</b>	<b>9-1</b>
9.1	GLOSSARY .....	9-1
9.2	LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	9-11

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.2-1	Status of bitumen reserves in the Athabasca oil sands region.....	1-3
Table 1.4-1	Measurement endpoints and criteria for determination of change used in the 2015 analysis. ....	1-15
Table 2.2-1	Development status of all oil sands projects in the JOSMP study area as of 2015. ....	2-2
Table 2.2-2	Summary of water withdrawals and discharges for active (operating or under construction) oil sands projects, used in the water balance analysis for the 2015 WY. ....	2-8
Table 2.3-1	Total area and percent of land change in watersheds of the Athabasca oil sands region related to oil sands development in 2015. ....	2-17
Table 3.1-1	Overview of the stations monitored for each component of the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-3
Table 3.1-2	Climate and hydrometric stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY.....	3-8
Table 3.1-3	Hydrometric stations that were discontinued from the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-16
Table 3.1-4	Summary of data available for the Climate and Hydrology component of the JOSMP for the 2015 WY, and used in this report.....	3-19
Table 3.1-5	Summary of data available for the Climate and Hydrology component of the JOSMP from 1997 to 2014, and used in this report.....	3-21
Table 3.1-6	Locations and attributes of the data sonde network operated for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-27
Table 3.1-7	Summary of discrete water quality sampling conducted for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-31
Table 3.1-8	Summary of fall water quality sampling conducted at stations of the Benthic Invertebrate Communities component and reaches of the Wild Fish Health Monitoring program of the JOSMP in the 2015 WY.....	3-33
Table 3.1-9	Accuracy and resolution of sondes and sensors deployed for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-34
Table 3.1-10	Standard water quality variables measured in support of the JOSMP, November 2014 to March 2015. ....	3-38
Table 3.1-11	PAH variables measured in water samples collected for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-40
Table 3.1-12	Standard water quality variables measured in support of the JOSMP, May to October 2015. ....	3-41
Table 3.1-13	Summary of discrete water quality data available for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY, and used in this report. ....	3-45



Table 3.1-14	Summary of discrete water quality data available for the JOSMP from 1997 to 2014, and used in this report. ....	3-49
Table 3.1-15	Benthic Invertebrate Communities stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-55
Table 3.1-16	Summary of data available for the Benthic Invertebrate Communities component of the JOSMP for the 2015 WY, and used in this report. ....	3-60
Table 3.1-17	Summary of data available for the Benthic Invertebrate Communities component of the JOSMP from 1997 to 2014, and used in this report. ....	3-63
Table 3.1-18	Summary of data available for the Sediment Quality component of the JOSMP for the 2015 WY, and used in this report. ....	3-68
Table 3.1-19	Summary of fall sediment quality sampling in the 2015 WY for the wild fish health monitoring program of the JOSMP. ....	3-69
Table 3.1-20	Standard sediment quality variables measured for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-70
Table 3.1-21	Summary of data available for the Sediment Quality component of the JOSMP from 1997 to 2014, and used in this report. ....	3-73
Table 3.1-22	Locations of reaches surveyed for the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-81
Table 3.1-23	Habitat types used for the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP (adapted from Peck et al. 2006). ....	3-82
Table 3.1-24	Percent cover rating for instream and overhead cover at each transect used for the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP (adapted from Peck et al. 2006). ....	3-82
Table 3.1-25	Substrate size class codes used for the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP (adapted from Peck et al. 2006). ....	3-82
Table 3.1-26	Location and general description of each reach sampled for the wild fish health survey on the Athabasca River, using trout-perch ( <i>Percopsis omiscomaycus</i> ), for the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-84
Table 3.1-27	Location of each reach sampled for the wild fish health survey on tributaries to the Athabasca River for the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-85
Table 3.1-28	Summary of data available for the Fish Populations component of the JOSMP for the 2015 WY, and used in this report. ....	3-87
Table 3.1-29	Summary of data available for the Fish Populations component of the JOSMP from 1997 to 2014, and used in this report. ....	3-89
Table 3.1-30	Lakes sampled for the Acid-Sensitive Lakes component of the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-95
Table 3.1-31	Water quality variables analyzed in lake water sampled for the Acid-Sensitive Lakes component of the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-96

Table 3.1-32	Metals analyzed in lake water sampled for the Acid-Sensitive Lakes component of the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-96
Table 3.1-33	Summary of lakes sampled for the Acid-Sensitive Lakes component of the JOSMP from 1999 to 2015. ....	3-97
Table 3.2-1	Alberta water quality guidelines used to screen data collected for the Water Quality component of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-107
Table 3.2-2	Regional <i>baseline</i> water quality data groups and station comparisons. ....	3-111
Table 3.2-3	Regional <i>baseline</i> values for water quality measurement endpoints, using data from 1997 to 2015, Group 1: Athabasca River and Delta. ....	3-112
Table 3.2-4	Regional <i>baseline</i> values for water quality measurement endpoints, using data from 1997 to 2015, Group 2: southern tributaries plus McLean Creek and the Mackay, Eils, Steepbank, and Firebag rivers. ....	3-113
Table 3.2-5	Regional <i>baseline</i> values for water quality measurement endpoints, using data from 1997 to 2015, Group 3: Poplar, Fort, Mills, Big, Redclay, and Eymundson creeks and the Beaver, Tar, Calumet, Pierre, and Muskeg rivers. ....	3-114
Table 3.2-6	Classification of results for the Benthic Invertebrate Communities component of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-122
Table 3.2-7	Regional <i>baseline</i> values for sediment quality measurement endpoints, using data from 1997 to 2015. ....	3-125
Table 3.2-8	Tolerance values for fish collected during the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP (adapted from Whittier et al. 2007). ....	3-127
Table 3.2-9	Habitat variables included in the principal components analysis used to assess covariation and to identify multivariate habitat variables (PC axis), 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-129
Table 3.2-10	Regional <i>baseline</i> fish community data groups and reach comparisons, 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-131
Table 3.2-11	Regional <i>baseline</i> ranges for fish community measurement endpoints for each cluster group for the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-132
Table 3.2-12	Classification of results for the fish community monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-133
Table 3.2-13	Measurement endpoints for wild fish health monitoring program of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-136
Table 3.2-14	Classification of results for wild fish health monitoring for the 2015 JOSMP. ....	3-139
Table 4.2-1	Long-term climate data available from Environment Canada stations operated at the Fort McMurray Airport, AB. ....	4-1
Table 4.3-1	Summary of 2015 hydrologic variables compared to historical values measured in the Athabasca oil sands region. ....	4-9
Table 5.1-1	Summary of results for the Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta. ....	5-3

Table 5.1-2	Estimated water balance at Station 07DD001, Athabasca River at Embarras Airport, 2015 WY.....	5-29
Table 5.1-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Athabasca River, 2015 WY.....	5-30
Table 5.1-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River centre channel ( <i>test</i> station ATR-DD-C), March and May to October 2015.....	5-32
Table 5.1-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River below Fort MacKay ( <i>test</i> station M6), May to October 2015.....	5-33
Table 5.1-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River above MacKay River ( <i>test</i> station M5), May to October 2015.....	5-34
Table 5.1-7	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River below Beaver River ( <i>test</i> station M4), May to October 2015.....	5-35
Table 5.1-8	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River centre channel ( <i>test</i> station ATR-DD-C), fall 2015 compared to fall 2014.....	5-38
Table 5.1-9	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River ( <i>test</i> stations M6, M5, and M4), fall 2015.....	5-39
Table 5.1-10	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>test</i> stations M4-DS, M4-US, and M3, and <i>baseline</i> station M0-DS), fall 2015.....	5-40
Table 5.1-11	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River Delta ( <i>test</i> stations BPC-1, EMR-2, FLC-1, and GIC-1), fall 2015.....	5-41
Table 5.1-12	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Athabasca River and Delta, 2015 WY.....	5-43
Table 5.1-13	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling reaches of the Athabasca River Delta ( <i>test</i> reaches BPC-1, FLC-1, GIC-1, and EMR-2), fall 2015.....	5-50
Table 5.1-14	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community of Big Point Channel ( <i>test</i> reach BPC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-51
Table 5.1-15	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community of Fletcher Channel ( <i>test</i> reach FLC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-52
Table 5.1-16	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities of Goose Island Channel ( <i>test</i> reach GIC-1) and the Embarras River ( <i>test</i> reach EMR-2) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-53
Table 5.1-17	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints of Big Point Channel ( <i>test</i> reach BPC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-54

Table 5.1-18	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints of Fletcher Channel ( <i>test reach</i> FLC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-57
Table 5.1-19	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints of Goose Island Channel ( <i>test reach</i> GIC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-58
Table 5.1-20	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints of Embarras River ( <i>test reach</i> EMR-2) of the Athabasca River Delta.....	5-59
Table 5.1-21	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints for Big Point Channel ( <i>test station</i> BPC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta, fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-60
Table 5.1-22	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints for Fletcher Channel ( <i>test station</i> FLC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta, fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-62
Table 5.1-23	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints for Goose Island Channel ( <i>test station</i> GIC-1) of the Athabasca River Delta, fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-64
Table 5.1-24	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints for Embarras River ( <i>test station</i> EMR-2) of the Athabasca River Delta, fall 2015, compared to historical concentrations.....	5-66
Table 5.1-25	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Athabasca River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>test stations</i> M4-DS, M4-US, and M3, and <i>baseline</i> station M0-DS), fall 2015.....	5-68
Table 5.1-26	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring reaches in the Athabasca River, fall 2015.....	5-69
Table 5.1-27	Summary of fish caught and mean length, weight, and relative abundance of juvenile fish at each sampling reach in the Athabasca River, fall 2015.....	5-71
Table 5.1-28	Summary of morphometric data (mean $\pm$ SE) for trout perch in reaches of the Athabasca River, fall 2015.....	5-73
Table 5.1-29	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA), analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for differences in measurement endpoints and EROD activity of adult trout-perch in the Athabasca River, fall 2015.....	5-75
Table 5.1-30	Classification of wild fish health results for all reaches of the Athabasca River, fall 2015.....	5-89
Table 5.2-1	Summary of results for the Muskeg River watershed.....	5-91
Table 5.2-2	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07DA008 (formerly JOSMP Station S7), Muskeg River near Fort McKay, 2015 WY.....	5-121
Table 5.2-3	Calculated changes in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Muskeg River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-122

Table 5.2-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station MU0 [MUR-1]), November 2014 to October 2015. ....	5-127
Table 5.2-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River near Fort McKay ( <i>test</i> station MU1), May to October 2015. ....	5-128
Table 5.2-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River above Jackpine Creek ( <i>test</i> station MU4), May to October 2015. ....	5-129
Table 5.2-7	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River above Muskeg Creek ( <i>test</i> station MU5), May to October 2015. ....	5-130
Table 5.2-8	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River above Stanley Creek ( <i>test</i> station MU6), May to October 2015. ....	5-131
Table 5.2-9	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River above Wapasu Creek ( <i>test</i> station MU7), July to September 2015. ....	5-132
Table 5.2-10	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River above Wapasu Creek ( <i>test</i> station MU8), May to October 2015. ....	5-133
Table 5.2-11	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River at Imperial Kearn Lake Road ( <i>test</i> station MU9), July and August 2015. ....	5-134
Table 5.2-12	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River upland ( <i>test</i> station MU10), May to October 2015. ....	5-135
Table 5.2-13	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackpine Creek near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station JA1 [JAC-1]), May to October 2015. ....	5-136
Table 5.2-14	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackpine Creek at Canterra Road ( <i>test</i> station TR3.1), July to October 2015. ....	5-137
Table 5.2-15	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackpine Creek 16.5 km upstream of the Muskeg River ( <i>baseline</i> station TR3.2), May to October 2015. ....	5-138
Table 5.2-16	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Wapasu Creek ( <i>test</i> station WA1 [WAC-1]), May to August and October 2015. ....	5-139
Table 5.2-17	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Stanley Creek ( <i>test</i> station STC-1), May to September 2015. ....	5-140
Table 5.2-18	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Kearn Lake ( <i>test</i> station KL1 [KEL-1]), May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-141
Table 5.2-19	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Muskeg River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station MU0 [MUR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-148
Table 5.2-20	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at new stations in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> stations MU1, MU4, MU5, MU6, MU7, MU8, and MU10) and in tributaries to the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> station TR3.1 and <i>baseline</i> station TR3.2), fall 2015. ....	5-149



Table 5.2-21	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackpine Creek near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station JA1 [JAC-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-151
Table 5.2-22	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at benthic invertebrate community station, Jackpine Creek above Jackpine Mine ( <i>baseline</i> station JAC-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-152
Table 5.2-23	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Stanley Creek ( <i>test</i> station STC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-153
Table 5.2-24	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Kearl Lake ( <i>test</i> station KL1 [KEL-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-154
Table 5.2-25	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Muskeg River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-157
Table 5.2-26	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reaches MUR-E1, MUR-D2, and MUR-D3), fall 2015. ....	5-165
Table 5.2-27	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in the lower Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-E1).....	5-166
Table 5.2-28	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in the middle Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-D2).....	5-167
Table 5.2-29	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in the upper Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-D3). ....	5-168
Table 5.2-30	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-E1). ....	5-169
Table 5.2-31	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-D2). ....	5-170
Table 5.2-32	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-D3). ....	5-171
Table 5.2-33	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in Jackpine Creek ( <i>test</i> reach JAC-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach JAC-D2), fall 2015. ....	5-177
Table 5.2-34	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in lower Jackpine Creek ( <i>test</i> reach JAC-D1). ....	5-178
Table 5.2-35	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at the upper reach of Jackpine Creek ( <i>baseline</i> reach JAC-D2). ....	5-179
Table 5.2-36	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Jackpine Creek ( <i>test</i> reach JAC-D1). ....	5-180
Table 5.2-37	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in Kearl Lake, fall 2015. ....	5-183

Table 5.2-38	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in Kearl Lake.....	5-184
Table 5.2-39	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake.....	5-185
Table 5.2-40	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> station MUR-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-188
Table 5.2-41	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> station MUR-D3), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-190
Table 5.2-42	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Jackpine Creek near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station JAC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-192
Table 5.2-43	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Jackpine Creek above Jackpine Mine ( <i>baseline</i> station JAC-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-194
Table 5.2-44	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake ( <i>test</i> station KEL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical concentrations.....	5-196
Table 5.2-45	Average habitat characteristics of fish community monitoring reach MUR-F2 in the Muskeg River, fall 2015. ....	5-198
Table 5.2-46	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of the Muskeg River, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-199
Table 5.2-47	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints ( $\pm$ 1SD) for reaches along the Muskeg River and Jackpine Creek, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-200
Table 5.2-48	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for temporal differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 in the Muskeg River (2011 to 2015).....	5-201
Table 5.2-49	Average habitat characteristics of fish community monitoring reaches of Jackpine Creek, fall 2015. ....	5-203
Table 5.2-50	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of Jackpine Creek, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-204
Table 5.2-51	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for reaches of Jackpine Creek. ....	5-205
Table 5.2-52	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 of the Muskeg River, compared to habitat characteristics of regional <i>baseline</i> reaches, fall 2015.....	5-207
Table 5.2-53	Summary of morphometric data for adult and juvenile lake chub caught at <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 and regional <i>baseline</i> reaches, fall 2015.....	5-208
Table 5.3-1	Summary of results for the Steepbank River watershed. ....	5-212

Table 5.3-2	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07DA006 (formerly JOSMP Station S38), Steepbank River near Fort McMurray, 2015 WY.....	5-222
Table 5.3-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Steepbank River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-222
Table 5.3-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Steepbank River ( <i>test</i> station ST1 [STR-1]), March to October 2015. ....	5-224
Table 5.3-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Steepbank River adjacent to Millennium Mine ( <i>test</i> station ST WSC), May to October 2015. ....	5-225
Table 5.3-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Steepbank River approximately 27 km upstream of mouth ( <i>test</i> station STB RIFF 7), May to October 2015. ....	5-226
Table 5.3-7	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Steepbank River above Millennium Mine ( <i>test</i> station STR-2), November 2014 to March 2015. ....	5-227
Table 5.3-8	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Steepbank River below North Steepbank River ( <i>test</i> station STB RIFF 10), May to October 2015. ....	5-228
Table 5.3-9	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at Steepbank River stations ( <i>test</i> stations STB WSC, STB RIFF 7, and STB RIFF 10), fall 2015.....	5-231
Table 5.3-10	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Steepbank River ( <i>test</i> station ST1 [STR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical concentrations. ....	5-232
Table 5.3-11	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Steepbank River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-234
Table 5.3-12	Average habitat characteristics of lower <i>test</i> reach STR-F1 and upper <i>baseline</i> reach STR-F2 in the Steepbank River, fall 2015. ....	5-237
Table 5.3-13	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of the Steepbank River, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-238
Table 5.3-14	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints ( $\pm$ 1SD) for <i>test</i> reach STR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach STR-F2 in the Steepbank River, 2009 to 2015.....	5-239
Table 5.3-15	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach STR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach STR-F2 of the Steepbank River.....	5-240
Table 5.4-1	Summary of results for the Tar River watershed. ....	5-242
Table 5.4-2	Estimated water balance at Tar River near the mouth (JOSMP Station S15A), 2015 WY. ....	5-255
Table 5.4-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Tar River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-256
Table 5.4-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Tar River ( <i>test</i> station TAR-1), May to September 2015.....	5-258

Table 5.4-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Tar River above Horizon Mine ( <i>baseline</i> station TAR-2A [TAR-2]), July to October 2015.....	5-259
Table 5.4-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Tar River ( <i>test</i> station TAR-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-262
Table 5.4-7	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Tar River above Horizon Mine ( <i>baseline</i> station TAR-2A [TAR-2]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-263
Table 5.4-8	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Tar River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-265
Table 5.4-9	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in the Tar River ( <i>test</i> reach TAR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-E2), fall 2015. ....	5-268
Table 5.4-10	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in the lower Tar River ( <i>test</i> reach TAR-D1).....	5-269
Table 5.4-11	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in the upper Tar River ( <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-E2).....	5-270
Table 5.4-12	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach TAR-D1.....	5-271
Table 5.4-13	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Tar River ( <i>test</i> station TAR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-276
Table 5.4-14	Average habitat characteristics of fish community upper <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-F2, fall 2015.....	5-278
Table 5.4-15	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of the Tar River, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-279
Table 5.4-16	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints for upper <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-F2 of the Tar River, 2011 to 2015.....	5-280
Table 5.4-17	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-F2 of the Tar River. ....	5-280
Table 5.5-1	Summary of results for the MacKay River watershed.....	5-282
Table 5.5-2	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07DB001 (formerly JOSMP Station S26), MacKay River near Fort McKay, 2015 WY. ....	5-300
Table 5.5-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the MacKay River watershed, 2015 WY.....	5-301
Table 5.5-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of MacKay River ( <i>test</i> station MA1 [MAR-1]), May to October 2015. ....	5-303
Table 5.5-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, MacKay River at Petro-Canada Bridge ( <i>baseline</i> station MA2 [MAR-2]), November 2014 to October 2015. ....	5-304

Table 5.5-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Dover River ( <i>baseline</i> station DOV RIFF 4), May to October 2015. ....	5-305
Table 5.5-7	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of MacKay River ( <i>test</i> station MA1 [MAR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-308
Table 5.5-8	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, MacKay River at the Petro-Canada Bridge ( <i>test</i> station MA2 [MAR-2]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-309
Table 5.5-9	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health stations in the MacKay River ( <i>test</i> stations MR-L and MR-M, and <i>baseline</i> station MR-U), fall 2015. ....	5-310
Table 5.5-10	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at <i>baseline</i> station DOV RIFF 4 and wild fish health reaches ( <i>baseline</i> stations DC-L, DC-M, and DC-U) in the Dover River, fall 2015. ....	5-311
Table 5.5-11	Water quality guideline exceedances in the MacKay River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-313
Table 5.5-12	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, MacKay River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>test</i> stations MR-L and MR-M, and <i>baseline</i> station MR-U), fall 2015. ....	5-317
Table 5.5-13	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Dover River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>baseline</i> stations DC-L, DC-M, and DC-U), fall 2015. ....	5-321
Table 5.5-14	Average habitat characteristics at fish community monitoring <i>test</i> reach MAR-F1 in the MacKay River, fall 2015. ....	5-325
Table 5.5-15	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of the MacKay River, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-326
Table 5.5-16	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints ( $\pm$ 1SD) for <i>test</i> reach MAR-F1 of the MacKay River, 2009 to 2015. ....	5-327
Table 5.5-17	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach MAR-F1 of the MacKay River. ....	5-328
Table 5.5-18	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring reaches in the MacKay River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-330
Table 5.5-19	Summary of fish caught and mean length, weight, and relative abundance of juveniles at each sampling reach in the MacKay River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-332
Table 5.5-20	Summary of morphometric data (mean $\pm$ 1SE) for adult target species of reaches in the MacKay River Watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-332
Table 5.5-21	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for differences in measurement endpoints of longnose dace along the MacKay River ( <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U and <i>test</i> reaches MR-M and MR-L), fall 2015. ....	5-335
Table 5.5-22	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for differences in measurement endpoints of lake chub in the Dover River ( <i>baseline</i> reaches DC-U, DC-M and DC-L), fall 2015. ....	5-340



Table 5.6-1	Summary of results for the Calumet River watershed. ....	5-342
Table 5.6-2	Estimated water balance at Calumet River near the mouth (JOSMP Station S16A), 2015 WY. ....	5-354
Table 5.6-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints in the Calumet River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-355
Table 5.6-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Calumet River ( <i>test</i> station CA1 [CAR-1]), May to September 2015. ....	5-356
Table 5.6-5	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Calumet River mouth ( <i>test</i> station CA1 [CAR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-359
Table 5.6-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, upper Calumet River ( <i>baseline</i> station CAR-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-360
Table 5.6-7	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Calumet River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-362
Table 5.6-8	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in the Calumet River ( <i>test</i> reach CAR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CAR-D2), fall 2015. ....	5-365
Table 5.6-9	Summary of major taxon abundances measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in the Calumet River ( <i>test</i> reach CAR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CAR-D2). ....	5-366
Table 5.6-10	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate community in the Calumet River ( <i>test</i> reach CAR-D1). ....	5-367
Table 5.6-11	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Calumet River ( <i>test</i> station CAR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-371
Table 5.6-12	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Calumet River ( <i>baseline</i> station CAR-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-373
Table 5.7-1	Summary of results for the Firebag River watershed. ....	5-376
Table 5.7-2	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07DC001 (formerly JOSMP Station S27), Firebag River near the mouth, 2015 WY. ....	5-391
Table 5.7-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Firebag River near the mouth, 2015 WY. ....	5-391
Table 5.7-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Firebag River ( <i>test</i> station FI1 [FIR-1]), May to October 2015. ....	5-394
Table 5.7-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Firebag River at WSC station ( <i>test</i> station FI WSC), May to October 2015. ....	5-395
Table 5.7-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Firebag River above the Suncor Firebag Project ( <i>baseline</i> station FI2 [FIR-2]), July to October 2015. ....	5-396

Table 5.7-7	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1), May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-397
Table 5.7-8	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1), March May, July, and September 2015.....	5-398
Table 5.7-9	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Firebag River ( <i>test</i> station FI1 [FIR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-403
Table 5.7-10	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Firebag River at WSC station ( <i>test</i> station FI WSC), fall 2015. ....	5-404
Table 5.7-11	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Firebag River above the Suncor Firebag Project ( <i>baseline</i> station FI2 [FIR-2]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-405
Table 5.7-12	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-406
Table 5.7-13	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-407
Table 5.7-14	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Firebag River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-409
Table 5.7-15	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in the Firebag River ( <i>test</i> reach FIR-D1), fall 2015. ....	5-414
Table 5.7-16	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at the lower Firebag River ( <i>test</i> reach FIR-D1). ....	5-415
Table 5.7-17	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in the Firebag River ( <i>test</i> reach FIR-D1). ....	5-416
Table 5.7-18	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1) and Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1), fall 2015.....	5-419
Table 5.7-19	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities, McClelland Lake and Johnson Lake. ....	5-420
Table 5.7-20	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1). ....	5-421
Table 5.7-21	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Firebag River ( <i>test</i> station FIR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-426
Table 5.7-22	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-428
Table 5.7-23	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1), fall 2015, and comparison to historical fall concentrations.....	5-430
Table 5.8-1	Summary of results for the Ells River watershed.....	5-432

Table 5.8-2	Estimated water balance at Ells River at the Canadian Natural Bridge (JOSMP Station S14A), 2015 WY. ....	5-452
Table 5.8-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Ells River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-453
Table 5.8-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Ells River ( <i>test</i> station ELLS RIFF 3 [ELR-1]), May to October 2015. ....	5-456
Table 5.8-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Ells River near the Canadian Natural bridge ( <i>test</i> station EL2 [ELR-2]), May to October 2015. ....	5-457
Table 5.8-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Ells River above Joslyn Creek diversion ( <i>baseline</i> station ELLS RIFF 5), May to October 2015. ....	5-458
Table 5.8-7	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Namur Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station NAL-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-461
Table 5.8-8	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gardiner Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station GAL-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-462
Table 5.8-9	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Ells River ( <i>test</i> station ELLS RIFF 3 [ELR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-465
Table 5.8-10	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Ells River near the Canadian Natural bridge ( <i>test</i> station EL2 [ELR-2]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-466
Table 5.8-11	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Ells River above Joslyn Creek diversion ( <i>baseline</i> station ELLS RIFF 5), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-467
Table 5.8-12	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Ells River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>test</i> stations ER-L and ER-M, and <i>baseline</i> station ER-U), fall 2015. ....	5-468
Table 5.8-13	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Namur Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station NAL-1), fall 2015, compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-469
Table 5.8-14	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gardiner Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station GAL-1), fall 2015, compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-470
Table 5.8-15	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Ells River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-472
Table 5.8-16	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate sampling location in the Ells River ( <i>test</i> reach ELR-D1), fall 2015. ....	5-477
Table 5.8-17	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at the lower Ells River ( <i>test</i> reach ELR-D1). ....	5-478
Table 5.8-18	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at the lower Ells River ( <i>test</i> reach ELR-D1). ....	5-479

Table 5.8-19	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in Namur and Gardiner lakes ( <i>baseline</i> stations NAL-1 and GAL-1), fall 2015. ....	5-482
Table 5.8-20	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints, Namur and Gardiner Lakes. ....	5-483
Table 5.8-21	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for temporal differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at Namur Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station NAL-1). ....	5-484
Table 5.8-22	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for temporal differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at Gardiner Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station GAL-1). ....	5-485
Table 5.8-23	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Elys River ( <i>test</i> station ELR-D1), fall 2015 compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-487
Table 5.8-24	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Elys River at wild fish health reaches ( <i>test</i> stations ER-L and ER-M, and <i>baseline</i> station ER-U), fall 2015. ....	5-489
Table 5.8-25	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Namur Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station NAL-1), fall 2015 compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-493
Table 5.8-26	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Gardiner Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station GAL-1), fall 2015 compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-495
Table 5.8-27	Average habitat characteristics at fish community monitoring reach ELR-F1 of the Elys River, fall 2015. ....	5-497
Table 5.8-28	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in reaches of the Elys River, 2010 to 2015. ....	5-498
Table 5.8-29	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints ( $\pm$ 1SD) for <i>test</i> reach ELR-F1 in the Elys River, 2010 to 2015. ....	5-499
Table 5.8-30	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach ELR-F1 of the Elys River. ....	5-500
Table 5.8-31	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring reaches in the Elys River, fall 2015. ....	5-502
Table 5.8-32	Summary of lake chub caught and mean length, weight, and relative abundance of juveniles in reaches of the Elys River, fall 2015. ....	5-503
Table 5.8-33	Summary of morphometric data (mean $\pm$ 1SE) for lake chub in reaches of the Elys River, fall 2015. ....	5-505
Table 5.8-34	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for differences in measurement endpoints of lake chub in the Elys River ( <i>baseline</i> reach ER-U and <i>test</i> reaches ER-M and ER-L), fall 2015. ....	5-506
Table 5.9-1	Summary of results for the Clearwater River watershed. ....	5-508
Table 5.9-2	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> station CL2 [CLR-1]), May to June 2015. ....	5-521

Table 5.9-3	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Clearwater River at Draper ( <i>test</i> station AB07CD0200), July to October 2015.....	5-522
Table 5.9-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, upper Clearwater River ( <i>baseline</i> station CLR-2), November 2014 to September 2015.....	5-523
Table 5.9-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, High Hills River ( <i>baseline</i> station HHR-1), March to October 2015.....	5-524
Table 5.9-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Clearwater River at Draper ( <i>test</i> station AB07CD0200), fall 2015. ....	5-527
Table 5.9-7	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints at benthic invertebrate communities reach, upper Clearwater River ( <i>baseline</i> station CLR-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-528
Table 5.9-8	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, High Hills River ( <i>baseline</i> station HHR-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-529
Table 5.9-9	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Clearwater River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-531
Table 5.9-10	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate community sampling locations of the Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> reach CLR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CLR-D2), fall 2015.....	5-534
Table 5.9-11	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at the Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> reach CLR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CLR-D2). ....	5-535
Table 5.9-12	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at the lower Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> reach CLR-D1).....	5-536
Table 5.9-13	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate community sampling location in the High Hills River ( <i>baseline</i> reach HHR-E1), fall 2015. ....	5-540
Table 5.9-14	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in High Hills River ( <i>baseline</i> reach HRR-E1), fall 2015. ....	5-541
Table 5.9-15	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> station CLR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-544
Table 5.9-16	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Clearwater River upstream of Christina River ( <i>baseline</i> station CLR-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-546
Table 5.10-1	Summary of results for the Christina River watershed. ....	5-548
Table 5.10-2	Estimated water balance at JOSMP Station S47A (formerly JOSMP Station S47), mouth of the Christina River, 2015 WY. ....	5-589
Table 5.10-3	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the mouth of the Christina River, 2015 WY.....	5-589



Table 5.10-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CH1 [CHR-1]), March to September 2015. ....	5-592
Table 5.10-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of Janvier ( <i>test</i> station CHR-2), November 2014 to October 2015.....	5-593
Table 5.10-6	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-3), March to October 2015.....	5-594
Table 5.10-7	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of development ( <i>baseline</i> station CHR-4), March to October 2015.....	5-595
Table 5.10-8	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sawbones Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station SAC-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-596
Table 5.10-9	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek at inlet to Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station SUC-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-597
Table 5.10-10	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek upstream ( <i>baseline</i> station SUC-2), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-598
Table 5.10-11	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Birch Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station BRC-1), March, May, July, and September 2015.....	5-599
Table 5.10-12	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, unnamed creek east of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-2), March, May, July, and September 2015.....	5-600
Table 5.10-13	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, unnamed creek south of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-3), March, May, July, and September 2015.....	5-601
Table 5.10-14	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> station JAR-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-602
Table 5.10-15	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> station GRR-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-603
Table 5.10-16	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station CHL-1), March, May, July, and September 2015.....	5-604
Table 5.10-17	Seasonal concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gregoire Lake ( <i>test</i> station GRL-1), March, May, July, and September 2015. ....	5-605
Table 5.10-18	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, mouth of Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CH1 [CHR-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-612
Table 5.10-19	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, lower Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-2A), fall 2015. ....	5-613
Table 5.10-20	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of Janvier ( <i>test</i> station CHR-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-614

Table 5.10-21	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-3), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-615
Table 5.10-22	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina River upstream of development ( <i>baseline</i> station CHR-4), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-616
Table 5.10-23	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sawbones Creek ( <i>test</i> station SAC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-617
Table 5.10-24	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek at the inlet to Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station SUC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-618
Table 5.10-25	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek upstream ( <i>baseline</i> station SUC-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-619
Table 5.10-26	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Birch Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station BRC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-620
Table 5.10-27	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, unnamed creek east of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-621
Table 5.10-28	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, unnamed creek south of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-3), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-622
Table 5.10-29	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> station JAR-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-623
Table 5.10-30	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> station GRR-1), fall 2015, compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-624
Table 5.10-31	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station CHL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-625
Table 5.10-32	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Gregoire Lake ( <i>test</i> station GRL-1), fall 2015, compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-626
Table 5.10-33	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Christina River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-630
Table 5.10-34	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in the Christina River, fall 2015. ....	5-638
Table 5.10-35	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at the depositional lower <i>test</i> reach CHR-D1 and middle <i>test</i> reach CHR-D2 of the Christina River. ....	5-639
Table 5.10-36	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at the depositional upper <i>test</i> reach CHR-D3 and <i>baseline</i> reach CHR-D4 of the Christina River. ....	5-640

Table 5.10-37	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate communities at the erosional middle <i>test</i> reach CHR-E2A of the Christina River.....	5-641
Table 5.10-38	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate key measurement endpoints in <i>test</i> reach CHR-D1 of the Christina River.....	5-642
Table 5.10-39	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate key measurement endpoints in <i>test</i> reach CHR-D2 of the Christina River.....	5-644
Table 5.10-40	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate key measurement endpoints in <i>test</i> reach CHR-D3 of the Christina River.....	5-644
Table 5.10-41	Results of the t-test for differences in benthic invertebrate key measurement endpoints in <i>test</i> reach CHR-E2A of the Christina River.....	5-645
Table 5.10-42	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in Sunday Creek, fall 2015.....	5-651
Table 5.10-43	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities of Sunday Creek.....	5-652
Table 5.10-44	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community endpoints at <i>test</i> reach SUC-D1 of Sunday Creek.....	5-653
Table 5.10-45	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in tributaries of Christina Lake, fall 2015.....	5-656
Table 5.10-46	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach SAC-D1 in Sawbones Creek.....	5-657
Table 5.10-47	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach UNC-D2 (unnamed creek east of Christina Lake) and <i>test</i> reach UNC-D3 (unnamed creek south of Christina Lake).....	5-658
Table 5.10-48	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach BRC-D1 in Birch Creek.....	5-659
Table 5.10-49	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach SAC-D1.....	5-659
Table 5.10-50	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach UNC-D2.....	5-661
Table 5.10-51	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach UNC-D3.....	5-661
Table 5.10-52	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate sampling location in the Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> reach JAR-E1) and Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1), fall 2015.....	5-666
Table 5.10-53	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> reach JAR-E1).....	5-667

Table 5.10-54	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in the Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1). .....	5-668
Table 5.10-55	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community endpoints in the lower Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> reach JAR-E1). .....	5-669
Table 5.10-56	Results of the t-tests for differences in benthic invertebrate community endpoints in the lower Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1). .....	5-671
Table 5.10-57	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in Christina Lake, fall 2015. ....	5-676
Table 5.10-58	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in Christina Lake. ....	5-677
Table 5.10-59	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community endpoints in Christina Lake. ....	5-678
Table 5.10-60	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in Gregoire Lake, fall 2015. ....	5-681
Table 5.10-61	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at Gregoire Lake (GRL-1). ....	5-682
Table 5.10-62	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community endpoints in Gregoire Lake. ....	5-683
Table 5.10-63	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-685
Table 5.10-64	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-687
Table 5.10-65	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Christina River ( <i>test</i> station CHR-D3), fall 2015, compared to fall 2014 concentrations. ....	5-689
Table 5.10-66	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Christina River ( <i>baseline</i> station CHR-D4), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-691
Table 5.10-67	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Birch Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station BRC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-693
Table 5.10-68	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Sawbones Creek ( <i>test</i> station SAC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-695
Table 5.10-69	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek ( <i>test</i> station SUC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-697
Table 5.10-70	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Sunday Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station SUC-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-699
Table 5.10-71	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, unnamed creek east of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-701

Table 5.10-72	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, unnamed creek south of Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station UNC-D3), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-703
Table 5.10-73	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station CHL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-705
Table 5.10-74	Concentrations of selected sediment measurement endpoints, Gregoire Lake ( <i>test</i> station GRL-1), fall 2015 compared to fall 2014 concentrations.....	5-707
Table 5.10-75	Average habitat characteristics of fish community monitoring <i>test</i> reach CHR-F2 of the Christina River, fall 2015.....	5-709
Table 5.10-76	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured at reaches of the Christina River, 2012 to 2015. ....	5-710
Table 5.10-77	Summary of fish community measurement endpoints ( $\pm$ 1SD) for reaches of the Christina River watershed, 2012 to 2015.....	5-711
Table 5.10-78	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for temporal differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach CHR-F2 in the Christina River.....	5-712
Table 5.10-79	Average habitat characteristics of fish community monitoring <i>test</i> reach JAR-F1 of the Jackfish River, fall 2015. ....	5-714
Table 5.10-80	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in tributaries of the Christina River, 2012 to 2015. ....	5-715
Table 5.10-81	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for temporal differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach JAR-F1 in the Jackfish River. ....	5-715
Table 5.10-82	Average habitat characteristics of fish community monitoring reaches in tributaries of Christina Lake, fall 2015.....	5-716
Table 5.10-83	Total number and percent composition of fish species captured in tributaries of the Christina River, 2012 to 2015. ....	5-717
Table 5.10-84	Total percent composition of fish species captured in tributaries of the Christina River, 2012 to 2015.....	5-717
Table 5.10-85	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach SUC-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach SUC-F2 in Sunday Creek. ....	5-719
Table 5.10-86	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring reaches in the Christina watershed, fall 2015.....	5-719
Table 5.10-87	Summary of slimy sculpin caught and mean length, weight and relative abundance of juveniles in reaches of the Christina River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-721
Table 5.10-88	Summary of morphometric data (mean $\pm$ 1SE) for slimy sculpin in <i>test</i> reaches JAR-F1 and SUC-F1 in the Christina River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-722
Table 5.11-1	Summary of results for the Hangingstone River watershed. ....	5-726

Table 5.11-2	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07CD004, Hangingstone River at Fort McMurray, 2015 WY. ....	5-738
Table 5.11-3	Estimated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Hangingstone River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-738
Table 5.11-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Hangingstone River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station HA1 [HAR-1A]), May to October 2015. ....	5-739
Table 5.11-5	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Hangingstone River above Fort McMurray ( <i>test</i> station HAR-1), May to October 2015.....	5-740
Table 5.11-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Hangingstone River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station HA1 [HAR-1A]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-743
Table 5.11-7	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Hangingstone River above Fort McMurray ( <i>test</i> station HAR-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-744
Table 5.11-8	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Hangingstone River watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-746
Table 5.11-9	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate sampling location in the Hangingstone River ( <i>test</i> reach HAR-E1), fall 2015. ....	5-749
Table 5.11-10	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community in the Hangingstone River ( <i>test</i> reach HAR-E1).....	5-750
Table 5.11-11	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015.....	5-753
Table 5.11-12	Summary of longnose dace caught and mean length, weight and relative abundance of juveniles at <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015. ....	5-754
Table 5.12-1	Summary of results for watersheds in the Pierre River area. ....	5-758
Table 5.12-2	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Big Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station UN1 [BIC-1]), May to September 2015.....	5-768
Table 5.12-3	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Big Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station UN1 [BIC-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-771
Table 5.12-4	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Pierre River ( <i>baseline</i> station PIR-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-772
Table 5.12-5	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Eymundson Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station EYC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations.....	5-773
Table 5.12-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Redclay Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station RCC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-774
Table 5.12-7	Water quality guideline exceedances in the Pierre River area, 2015 WY. ....	5-776



Table 5.12-8	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate community sampling locations in the Pierre River area ( <i>baseline</i> reaches BIC-D1, EYC-D1, PIR-D1, and RCC-E1), fall 2015. ....	5-779
Table 5.12-9	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Big Creek ( <i>baseline</i> reach BIC-D1). ....	5-780
Table 5.12-10	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in Eymundson Creek ( <i>baseline</i> reach EYC-D1). ....	5-781
Table 5.12-11	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in Pierre River ( <i>baseline</i> reach PIR-D1). ....	5-782
Table 5.12-12	Summary of major taxa abundances and measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities in Redclay Creek ( <i>baseline</i> reach RCC-E1). ....	5-783
Table 5.12-13	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Big Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station BIC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-784
Table 5.12-14	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Pierre River ( <i>baseline</i> station PIR-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-786
Table 5.12-15	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in Eymundson Creek ( <i>baseline</i> station EYC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-788
Table 5.13-1	Summary of results for the miscellaneous aquatic systems of the 2015 JOSMP study area. ....	5-790
Table 5.13-2	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> station FOC-1), May to September 2015. ....	5-818
Table 5.13-3	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, McLean Creek ( <i>test</i> station MCC-1), May to September 2015. ....	5-819
Table 5.13-4	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Horse River ( <i>test</i> station HO2), May to October 2015. ....	5-820
Table 5.13-5	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> station FOC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-823
Table 5.13-6	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, McLean Creek ( <i>test</i> station MCC-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-824
Table 5.13-7	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Horse River ( <i>test</i> station HO2), fall 2015. ....	5-825
Table 5.13-8	Water quality guideline exceedances at <i>test</i> station FOC-1, <i>test</i> station PO1, <i>test</i> station BER-1, <i>baseline</i> station BER-2, <i>test</i> station HO2, <i>test</i> station MCC-1, <i>baseline</i> stations AC-DS and AC-US, <i>test</i> station ISL-1, and <i>test</i> station SHL-1, 2015 WY. ....	5-827
Table 5.13-9	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling location in Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> reach FOC-D1), fall 2015. ....	5-833

Table 5.13-10	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at lower Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> reach FOC-D1). .....	5-834
Table 5.13-11	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in lower Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> reach FOC-D1). .....	5-835
Table 5.13-12	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> station FOC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-838
Table 5.13-13	Estimated water balance at WSC Station 07DA007 (JOSMP Station S11), Poplar Creek at Highway 63, 2015 WY. ....	5-841
Table 5.13-14	Calculated change in hydrologic measurement endpoints for the Poplar Creek watershed, 2015 WY. ....	5-842
Table 5.13-15	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> station PO1 [POC-1]), November 2014 to October 2015. ....	5-844
Table 5.13-16	Monthly concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Beaver River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station BER-1), May to October 2015. ....	5-845
Table 5.13-17	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> station PO1 [POC-1]), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-846
Table 5.13-18	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Beaver River near the mouth ( <i>test</i> station BER-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-847
Table 5.13-19	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, upper Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> station BER-2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-848
Table 5.13-20	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in the Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> reach BER-D2) and Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> reach POC-D1), fall 2015. ....	5-852
Table 5.13-21	Summary of major taxon abundances and measurement endpoints of the benthic invertebrate communities at the upper Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> reach BER-D2) and lower Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> reach POC-D1). ....	5-853
Table 5.13-22	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> reach POC-D1) and upper Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> reach BER-D2). ....	5-854
Table 5.13-23	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> station POC-D1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-857
Table 5.13-24	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, upper Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> station BER-D2), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-859
Table 5.13-25	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Alice Creek at wild fish health reaches ( <i>baseline</i> stations AC-DS and AC-US), fall 2015. ....	5-862
Table 5.13-26	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Alice Creek at wild fish health reaches ( <i>baseline</i> stations AC-DS and AC-US), fall 2015. ....	5-863

Table 5.13-27	Average habitat characteristics of wild fish health monitoring reaches in Alice Creek ( <i>baseline</i> stations AC-DS and AC-US), fall 2015. ....	5-866
Table 5.13-28	Summary of lake chub caught and mean length, weight, and relative abundance of juveniles at sampling reaches of Alice Creek, fall 2015. ....	5-866
Table 5.13-29	Summary of morphometric data (mean $\pm$ 1SE) for lake chub in reaches of Alice Creek, fall 2015. ....	5-867
Table 5.13-30	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for differences in measurement endpoints of lake chub in Alice Creek ( <i>baseline</i> reaches AC-US and AC-DS), fall 2015. ....	5-869
Table 5.13-31	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-871
Table 5.13-32	Average habitat characteristics of the benthic invertebrate sampling location in Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1), fall 2015. ....	5-874
Table 5.13-33	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints, Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1). ....	5-875
Table 5.13-34	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1). ....	5-876
Table 5.13-35	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-879
Table 5.13-36	Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints, Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-881
Table 5.13-37	Average habitat characteristics of benthic invertebrate sampling locations in Shipyard Lake, fall 2015. ....	5-882
Table 5.13-38	Summary of major taxon abundances and benthic invertebrate measurement endpoints, Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1). ....	5-883
Table 5.13-39	Results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing for differences in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1). ....	5-884
Table 5.13-40	Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints, Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1), fall 2015, compared to historical fall concentrations. ....	5-887
Table 5.14-1	Morphometric statistics for the 50 acid-sensitive lakes. ....	5-900
Table 5.14-2	Summary of chemical characteristics of the acid-sensitive lakes, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-901
Table 5.14-3	Acid-sensitive lakes with chemical characteristics either below the 5 <sup>th</sup> or above the 95 <sup>th</sup> percentile in 2015. ....	5-902
Table 5.14-4	Among-year comparisons of ASL measurement endpoints using the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the general linear model (GLM), 2002 to 2015. ....	5-904
Table 5.14-5	Critical loads of acidity in the acid-sensitive lakes, 2002 to 2015. ....	5-905

Table 5.14-6	Summary of critical loads of acidity in the acid-sensitive lakes, 2002 to 2015. ....	5-907
Table 5.14-7	Mean critical loads of acidity for acid-sensitive lakes within each subregion in 2015. ....	5-907
Table 5.14-8	Chemical characteristics of acid-sensitive lakes with the modeled potential acid input in 2015 greater than the calculated critical load.....	5-907
Table 5.14-9	Results of Mann-Kendall trend analyses on measurement endpoints for the acid-sensitive lakes, 1999 to 2015.....	5-908
Table 5.14-10	Acidification risk factor for individual acid-sensitive lakes exposed to acidifying emissions, 2015. ....	5-913
Table 5.14-11	Rating of acid-sensitive lakes in 2015 for evidence of incipient acidification.....	5-921
Table 6.1-1	Station information for data sonde stations where turbidity-TSS relationships were explored, with associated hydrology stations.....	6-2
Table 6.1-2	Statistics for best-fit linear regressions that predict TSS using turbidity, for the Ells and MacKay rivers .....	6-7
Table 6.2-1	Sampling locations for the expanded fish community program on tributaries of the Athabasca River, fall 2015. ....	6-17
Table 6.2-2	Description of mesohabitat categories used to select fishing habitat for additional backpack electrofishing and supplemental gear types. ....	6-18
Table 6.2-3	Supplemental gear types used within sub-reaches of each expanded fish monitoring reach. ....	6-21
Table 6.2-4	Tolerance values for fish collected during the expanded fish community study of the 2015 JOSMP (adapted from Whittier et al. 2007).....	6-22
Table 6.2-5	Measurement endpoints for each expanded fish community monitoring reach using expanded 10 sub-reach design to original 5 sub-reach design, fall 2015.....	6-25
Table 6.2-6	Precision of estimating measurement endpoints using original (n=5 sub-reaches) and extended (n=10 sub-reaches) survey efforts by reach and overall, fall 2015.....	6-26
Table 6.2-7	Comparison of fish species composition and effort by sub-reach sampled using primary backpack electrofishing methods and supplemental gear types. ....	6-28
Table 6.2-8	Summary of species composition, richness, and effort by reach using the primary backpack electrofishing methods and supplemental gear types. ....	6-30
Table 6.3-1	Habitat data collected from each sub-reach in support of the summer fish inventory pilot study. ....	6-38
Table 6.3-2	Common name, scientific name and species codes for fish species caught during the pilot study and the RAMP/JOSMP summer inventories. ....	6-40
Table 6.3-3	Average characteristics of the river channel at each reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-41

Table 6.3-4	Average characteristics of Riparian Zone 1 at each reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-42
Table 6.3-5	Average characteristics of Riparian Zone 2 at each reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-42
Table 6.3-6	Summary of water quality within each study reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-43
Table 6.3-7	Number of fish captured by species and species richness within each sampling reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-44
Table 6.3-8	Catch-per-unit-effort by species for each sampling reach of the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-46
Table 6.3-9	Incidence of external health abnormalities in fish captured during the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-49
Table 6.3-10	Percent of sportfish captured in the Pilot study with external pathology (growth/lesion, deformity, parasites), summer 2015. ....	6-49
Table 6.3-11	Catch-per-unit-effort by species for the 2015 pilot study compared to previous summer inventories in the Athabasca River (1989 to 2014). ....	6-52
Table 6.3-12	Total relative effort for the 2015 pilot study compared to previous summer inventories in the Athabasca River (1989 to 2014). ....	6-53
Table 7.1-1	Summary assessment of 2015 WY monitoring results. ....	7-3
Table 7.1-2	Summary assessment of the 2015 WY hydrologic monitoring results. ....	7-5

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.3-1	Study area for the 2015 Program and locations of oil sands developments. ....	1-5
Figure 1.3-2	Hydrologic schematic of the study area for the 2015 Program.....	1-7
Figure 1.4-1	Overall analytical approach for 2015. ....	1-14
Figure 2.2-1	Locations of surface water withdrawals and releases for active oil sands projects, used in the water balance calculations, 2015 WY. ....	2-9
Figure 2.3-1	Land change classes derived from 5-m RapidEye (June, July, and August 2015) multispectral satellite imagery, north of Fort McMurray. ....	2-13
Figure 2.3-2	Land change classes derived from 5-m RapidEye (June, July, and August 2015) multispectral satellite imagery, south of Fort McMurray. ....	2-15
Figure 3.1-1	Locations of climate stations and snowcourse survey stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-11
Figure 3.1-2	Locations of hydrometric stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY.....	3-13
Figure 3.1-3	Locations of water quality and data sonde stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-29
Figure 3.1-4	Locations of benthic invertebrate community reaches and sediment quality stations monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-57
Figure 3.1-5	Location of fish monitoring activities conducted for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY. ....	3-79
Figure 3.1-6	Locations of Acid-Sensitive Lakes monitored for the JOSMP in the 2015 WY.....	3-93
Figure 3.2-1	Example of monthly water quality data for the 2015 WY presented with historical data for a specific station, in this case, for concentrations of calcium in the Ells River watershed. ....	3-105
Figure 3.2-2	Example Piper diagram, illustrating relative ion concentrations in waters from Ells River Watershed, 1998 to 2015. ....	3-109
Figure 3.2-3	Example of a comparison of data from a specific watershed against regional <i>baseline</i> concentrations and water quality guidelines, in this case, total dissolved solids in the Ells River watershed. ....	3-115
Figure 3.2-4	Example of a time trend chart showing the total abundance ( $\log_{10}$ ) of a benthic invertebrate community in relation to the within-reach range of variability, in this case, for the Clearwater River. ....	3-120
Figure 3.2-5	Example of outer and inner 95 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> percentiles representing the normal range for Shipyard Lake.....	3-121
Figure 4.2-1	2015 WY daily mean air temperature at Fort McMurray Airport compared to historical values (1945 to 2014). ....	4-2
Figure 4.2-2	2015 WY monthly mean air temperatures at Fort McMurray Airport compared to historical values (1945 to 2014). ....	4-3



Figure 4.2-3	Historical annual precipitation at the Fort McMurray Airport, 1945 WY to 2015 WY. ....	4-4
Figure 4.2-4	2015 WY total monthly precipitation at the Fort McMurray Airport compared to historical values (1945 to 2014). ....	4-5
Figure 4.2-5	Cumulative total precipitation at climate stations in the Athabasca oil sands region in 2015. ....	4-6
Figure 4.2-6	Maximum mean measured snowpack amounts in the Athabasca oil sands region, 2004 to 2015. ....	4-7
Figure 4.2-7	Comparison of snowpack depth (cm) observed at climate stations and snow water equivalent (SWE, mm) measured in each land category in 2015. ....	4-8
Figure 4.3-1	Runoff volumes from the Athabasca River 07DA001 station from 1958 to 2015 WY. ....	4-10
Figure 4.3-2	The 2015 WY Athabasca River (07DA001) hydrograph compared to historical values (1958 to 2015). ....	4-11
Figure 4.3-3	Seasonal (March to October) runoff volumes for the Muskeg River 07DA008 station from 1974 to 2015. ....	4-12
Figure 4.3-4	The 2015 WY Muskeg River (07DA008) hydrograph compared to historical values and 2015 daily precipitation data at the C1 Aurora Climate Station. ....	4-13
Figure 4.3-5	Seasonal (March to October) runoff volumes for the Mackay River 07DB001 station from 1973 to 2015. ....	4-14
Figure 4.3-6	The 2015 WY MacKay River (07DB001) hydrograph compared to historical values and 2015 daily precipitation data at the EC Mildred Lake climate station. ....	4-15
Figure 4.3-7	Seasonal (March to October) runoff volumes for the Christina River 07CE002 station from 1973 to 2015. ....	4-16
Figure 4.3-8	The 2015 WY Christina River (07CE002) hydrograph compared to historical values and 2015 daily precipitation data at the C5 Surmont climate station. ....	4-17
Figure 5.1-1	Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta. ....	5-5
Figure 5.1-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta, fall 2015. ....	5-7
Figure 5.1-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Athabasca River near Embarras Airport for the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-28
Figure 5.1-4	In situ water quality trends in the Athabasca River recorded by data sonde, May to October 2015. ....	5-31
Figure 5.1-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Athabasca River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-36
Figure 5.1-6	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta. ....	5-42

Figure 5.1-7	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Athabasca River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-44
Figure 5.1-8	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Athabasca River at wild fish health reaches (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-46
Figure 5.1-9	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Athabasca River Delta (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-48
Figure 5.1-10	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional channels of the Athabasca River Delta ( <i>test</i> reaches BPC-1, FLC-1, GIC-1, and EMR-2). ....	5-55
Figure 5.1-11	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints of the Athabasca River Delta, relative to the historical ranges of variability.....	5-56
Figure 5.1-12	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Big Point Channel, <i>test</i> station BPC-1, relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-61
Figure 5.1-13	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Fletcher Channel, <i>test</i> station FLC-1, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-63
Figure 5.1-14	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Goose Island Channel, <i>test</i> station GIC-1, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-65
Figure 5.1-15	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Embarras River, <i>test</i> station EMR-2, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-67
Figure 5.1-16	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health reaches in the Athabasca River, August to September 2015. ....	5-70
Figure 5.1-17	Length-frequency distributions of trout perch in wild fish health reaches of the Athabasca River, fall 2015. ....	5-72
Figure 5.1-18	Relative age-frequency distribution for trout perch at <i>baseline</i> reaches M0-US, M0-DS, M2, and M3, and <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, M7, M8, and M9 in the Athabasca River, fall 2015. ....	5-74
Figure 5.1-19	Age of mature female trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-78
Figure 5.1-20	Age of mature male trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-79
Figure 5.1-21	Total weight (age-normalized) of mature female trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-80
Figure 5.1-22	Total weight (age-normalized) of mature male trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined. ....	5-81

Figure 5.1-23	GSI of mature female trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-82
Figure 5.1-24	GSI of mature male trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-83
Figure 5.1-25	LSI of mature female trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-84
Figure 5.1-26	LSI of mature male trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-85
Figure 5.1-27	Condition factor (K) of mature female trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined. ....	5-86
Figure 5.1-28	Condition factor (K) of mature male trout perch in the Athabasca River over time for <i>baseline</i> reaches M2 and M3, <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, and M8, and all reaches combined.....	5-87
Figure 5.1-29	EROD activity of mature female and male trout perch at <i>baseline</i> reaches M0-US, M0-DS, M2, and M3, and <i>test</i> reaches M4-US, M4-DS, M7, M8, and M9 in the Athabasca River, fall 2015. ....	5-88
Figure 5.2-1	Muskeg River watershed. ....	5-93
Figure 5.2-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Muskeg River watershed, 2015.....	5-95
Figure 5.2-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Muskeg River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-120
Figure 5.2-4	Hydrologic change classification of Muskeg River, 2015 WY.....	5-123
Figure 5.2-5	Observed lake levels for Kearl Lake in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-125
Figure 5.2-6	In situ water quality trends in the Muskeg River recorded by data sondes, April to October 2015. ....	5-126
Figure 5.2-7	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-142
Figure 5.2-8	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in tributaries of the Muskeg River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-144
Figure 5.2-9	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake (seasonal data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-146
Figure 5.2-10	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Muskeg River.....	5-155
Figure 5.2-11	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in tributaries to the Muskeg River and Kearl Lake.....	5-156

Figure 5.2-12	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-159
Figure 5.2-13	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Muskeg River tributaries (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-161
Figure 5.2-14	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake (fall data). ....	5-163
Figure 5.2-15	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of erosional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reach MUR-E1). ....	5-172
Figure 5.2-16	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach MUR-E1 of the Muskeg River, relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-173
Figure 5.2-17	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the middle and upper reaches of the Muskeg River ( <i>test</i> reaches MUR-D2 and MIR-D3). ....	5-174
Figure 5.2-18	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at middle <i>test</i> reach MUR-D2 of the Muskeg River, relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-175
Figure 5.2-19	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at upper <i>test</i> reach MUR-D3 of the Muskeg River relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-176
Figure 5.2-20	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower and upper reaches of Jackpine Creek ( <i>test</i> reach JAC-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach JAC-D2). ....	5-181
Figure 5.2-21	Variations in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach JAC-D1 and upper <i>baseline</i> reach JAC-D2 of Jackpine Creek relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-182
Figure 5.2-22	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of lakes in the oil sands region, showing Kearl Lake. ....	5-186
Figure 5.2-23	Variations in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake (KEL-1) relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-187
Figure 5.2-24	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River, <i>test</i> station MUR-D2, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-189
Figure 5.2-25	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Muskeg River, <i>test</i> station MUR-D3, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-191
Figure 5.2-26	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Jackpine Creek near the mouth, <i>test</i> station JAC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-193

Figure 5.2-27	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Jackpine Creek above Jackpine Mine, <i>baseline</i> station JAC-D2, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-195
Figure 5.2-28	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Kearl Lake, <i>test</i> station KEL-1, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-197
Figure 5.2-29	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 in the Muskeg River from 2009 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions (cluster 1).....	5-202
Figure 5.2-30	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for reaches of Jackpine Creek from 2009 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions (cluster 1).....	5-206
Figure 5.2-31	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2, August to September 2015.....	5-208
Figure 5.2-32	Length-frequency distribution of juvenile lake chub in wild fish health <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 compared to regional <i>baseline</i> reaches, fall 2015. ....	5-209
Figure 5.2-33	Measurement endpoints between female lake chub from <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 and female lake chub from regional <i>baseline</i> reaches, fall 2015.....	5-209
Figure 5.2-34	Relative age-frequency distribution for lake chub captured at <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2, fall 2015.....	5-210
Figure 5.2-35	MUR-F2 female lake chub growth in relation to regional <i>baseline</i> reaches females, fall 2015. ....	5-210
Figure 5.2-36	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) between female lake chub from <i>test</i> reach MUR-F2 and female lake chub from regional <i>baseline</i> reaches, fall 2015.....	5-211
Figure 5.3-1	Steepbank River watershed.....	5-213
Figure 5.3-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Steepbank River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-214
Figure 5.3-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Steepbank River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-221
Figure 5.3-4	In situ water quality trends in the Steepbank River recorded by data sondes, July to October 2015. ....	5-223
Figure 5.3-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Steepbank River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-229
Figure 5.3-6	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Steepbank River watershed. ....	5-233
Figure 5.3-7	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Steepbank River (fall data) relative to historical and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-235
Figure 5.3-8	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for the Steepbank River from 2009 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions. ....	5-241
Figure 5.4-1	Tar River watershed.....	5-243
Figure 5.4-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Tar River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-244

Figure 5.4-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Tar River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-254
Figure 5.4-4	Hydrologic change classification of the Tar River, 2015 WY. ....	5-257
Figure 5.4-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Tar River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-260
Figure 5.4-6	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Tar River watershed. ....	5-264
Figure 5.4-7	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Tar River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-266
Figure 5.4-8	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Tar River ( <i>test</i> reach TAR-D1). ....	5-272
Figure 5.4-9	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach TAR-D1 of the Tar River relative to historical ranges of variability. ....	5-273
Figure 5.4-10	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at upper <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-E2 of the Tar River. ....	5-274
Figure 5.4-11	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of erosional reaches, showing the upper reach of the Tar River ( <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-E2). ....	5-275
Figure 5.4-12	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Tar River watershed at <i>test</i> station TAR-D1 (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-277
Figure 5.4-13	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for upper <i>baseline</i> reach TAR-F2 from 2009 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions. ....	5-281
Figure 5.5-1	MacKay River watershed. ....	5-283
Figure 5.5-2	Representative monitoring stations of the MacKay River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-284
Figure 5.5-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the MacKay River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-299
Figure 5.5-4	In situ water quality trends in the MacKay River recorded by data sondes, July to October 2015. ....	5-302
Figure 5.5-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the MacKay River watershed (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-306
Figure 5.5-6	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the MacKay River watershed. ....	5-312
Figure 5.5-7	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the MacKay River watershed (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-315



Figure 5.5-8	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>test</i> station MR-L, lower MacKay River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-318
Figure 5.5-9	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>test</i> station MR-M, mid MacKay River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-319
Figure 5.5-10	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>baseline</i> station MR-U, upper MacKay River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-320
Figure 5.5-11	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>baseline</i> station DC-L, lower Dover River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-322
Figure 5.5-12	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>baseline</i> station DC-M, mid Dover River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-323
Figure 5.5-13	Concentrations of selected sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>baseline</i> station DC-U, upper Dover River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-324
Figure 5.5-14	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach MAR-F1 in the MacKay River from 2009 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions. ....	5-329
Figure 5.5-15	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health reaches in the MacKay River, August to September 2015. ....	5-331
Figure 5.5-16	Length-frequency distributions of longnose dace in wild fish health reaches of the MacKay River, fall 2015. ....	5-333
Figure 5.5-17	Relative age-frequency distribution for longnose dace at <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U and <i>test</i> reaches MR-M and MR-L in the MacKay River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-334
Figure 5.5-18	Relationship between body weight (g) and gonad weight (g) of female and male longnose dace at <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U and <i>test</i> reaches MR-M and MR-L in the MacKay River, fall 2015. ....	5-336
Figure 5.5-19	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male longnose dace at <i>baseline</i> (MR-U) and <i>test</i> (MR-M and MR-L) reaches on the MacKay River, fall 2015. ....	5-336
Figure 5.5-20	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health reaches in the Dover River, August to September 2015.....	5-337
Figure 5.5-21	Length-frequency distributions of lake chub in wild fish health reaches of the Dover River, fall 2015. ....	5-338
Figure 5.5-22	Relative age-frequency distribution for lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reaches of the Dover River, fall 2015. ....	5-339
Figure 5.5-23	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reaches of the Dover River, fall 2015. ....	5-341
Figure 5.6-1	Calumet River watershed.....	5-343

Figure 5.6-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Calumet River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-344
Figure 5.6-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Calumet River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-353
Figure 5.6-4	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Calumet River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-357
Figure 5.6-5	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in Calumet River watershed. ....	5-361
Figure 5.6-6	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Calumet River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-363
Figure 5.6-7	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower and upper reaches of the Calumet River ( <i>test</i> reach CAR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CAR-D2). ....	5-369
Figure 5.6-8	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach CAR-D1 and upper <i>baseline</i> reach CAR-D2 of the Calumet River relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability.....	5-370
Figure 5.6-9	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Calumet River, <i>test</i> station CAR-D1, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> concentrations.....	5-372
Figure 5.6-10	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Ells River, <i>test</i> station CAR-D2, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> concentrations.....	5-374
Figure 5.7-1	Firebag River watershed.....	5-377
Figure 5.7-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Firebag River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-378
Figure 5.7-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Firebag River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-390
Figure 5.7-4	Variation in the water level of McClelland Lake in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-392
Figure 5.7-5	In situ water quality trends in the Firebag River recorded by data sondes, May to October 2015. ....	5-393
Figure 5.7-6	Concentration of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Firebag River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY.....	5-399
Figure 5.7-7	Concentration of selected water quality measurement endpoints for McClelland Lake and Johnson Lake (seasonal data) in the 2015 WY.....	5-401
Figure 5.7-8	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Firebag River watershed. ....	5-408
Figure 5.7-9	Concentration of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Firebag River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-410
Figure 5.7-10	Concentration of selected water quality measurement endpoints in McClelland Lake and Johnson Lake (fall data), relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-412

Figure 5.7-11	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Firebag River ( <i>test</i> reach FIR-D1). .....	5-417
Figure 5.7-12	Variation in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach FIR-D1 of the Firebag River relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-418
Figure 5.7-13	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of the study lakes, showing McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1). ....	5-422
Figure 5.7-14	Variation in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in McClelland Lake ( <i>test</i> station MCL-1) relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-423
Figure 5.7-15	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of the study lakes, showing Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1). ....	5-424
Figure 5.7-16	Variation in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Johnson Lake ( <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1) relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-425
Figure 5.7-17	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at the mouth of the Firebag River, <i>test</i> station FIR-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-427
Figure 5.7-18	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in McClelland Lake, <i>baseline</i> station MCL-1, relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-429
Figure 5.7-19	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Johnson Lake, <i>baseline</i> station JOL-1, relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-431
Figure 5.8-1	Ells River watershed. ....	5-433
Figure 5.8-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Ells River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-434
Figure 5.8-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Ells River for the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-451
Figure 5.8-4	Observed lake levels for Namur Lake, 2012-2015 WY. ....	5-454
Figure 5.8-5	In situ water quality trends in the Ells River recorded by data sondes, July to October 2015. ....	5-455
Figure 5.8-6	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Ells River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-459
Figure 5.8-7	Selected water quality measurement endpoints for Namur Lake and Gardiner Lake (seasonal data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-463
Figure 5.8-8	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Ells River watershed. ....	5-471
Figure 5.8-9	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Ells River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-473

Figure 5.8-10	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Namur Lake and Gardiner Lake (fall data). .....	5-475
Figure 5.8-11	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Ells River ( <i>test</i> reach ELR-D1). .....	5-480
Figure 5.8-12	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach ELR-D1 of the Ells River relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-481
Figure 5.8-13	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at Gardiner Lake and Namur Lake ( <i>baseline</i> stations GAL-1 and NAL-1). .....	5-486
Figure 5.8-14	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Ells River, <i>test</i> station ELR-D1 (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-488
Figure 5.8-15	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>test</i> station ER-L, lower Ells River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-490
Figure 5.8-16	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>test</i> station ER-M, mid Ells River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-491
Figure 5.8-17	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at wild fish health <i>baseline</i> station ER-U in the upper Ells River (fall data) relative to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-492
Figure 5.8-18	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Namur Lake, <i>baseline</i> station NAL-1 (fall data). .....	5-494
Figure 5.8-19	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Gardiner Lake, <i>baseline</i> station GAL-1 (fall data). .....	5-496
Figure 5.8-20	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach ELR-F1 in the Ells River from 2010 to 2015 relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions (cluster 3). .....	5-501
Figure 5.8-21	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health reaches in the Ells River, August to October 2015. ....	5-503
Figure 5.8-22	Length-frequency distribution of lake chub in wild fish health reaches of the Ells River, fall 2015. ....	5-504
Figure 5.8-23	Relative age-frequency distributions for lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reach ER-U and <i>test</i> reaches ER-M and ER-L in the Ells River, fall 2015. ....	5-505
Figure 5.8-24	Relationship between body weight (g) and liver weight (g) of female and male lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reach ER-U and <i>test</i> reaches ER-M and ER-L in the Ells River, fall 2015. ....	5-507
Figure 5.8-25	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reach ER-U and <i>test</i> reaches ER-M and ER-L in the Ells River, fall 2015. ....	5-507
Figure 5.9-1	Clearwater River watershed. ....	5-509

Figure 5.9-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Clearwater River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-510
Figure 5.9-3	Hydrograph for the Clearwater River at Draper for the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-519
Figure 5.9-4	In situ water quality trends in the Clearwater River watershed recorded by data sondes, July to October 2015. ....	5-520
Figure 5.9-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Clearwater River watershed (monthly data) in the 2015 WY.....	5-525
Figure 5.9-6	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Clearwater River watershed. ....	5-530
Figure 5.9-7	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Clearwater River watershed (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-532
Figure 5.9-8	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower and upper reaches of the Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> reach CLR-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach CLR-D2).....	5-538
Figure 5.9-9	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at lower <i>test</i> reach CLR-D1 and upper <i>baseline</i> reach CLR-D2 in the Clearwater River relative to the historical ranges of variability.....	5-539
Figure 5.9-10	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities in the High Hills River ( <i>baseline</i> reach HHR-E1). ....	5-542
Figure 5.9-11	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>baseline</i> reach HHR-E1 in the High Hills River. ....	5-543
Figure 5.9-12	Variation in selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Clearwater River ( <i>test</i> station CLR-D1) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-545
Figure 5.9-13	Variation in selected sediment quality measurement endpoints, Clearwater River ( <i>baseline</i> station CLR-D2) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-547
Figure 5.10-1	Christina River watershed.....	5-549
Figure 5.10-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Christina River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-551
Figure 5.10-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Christina River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-588
Figure 5.10-4	Observed lake levels for Christina Lake near Winfred Lake in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-590
Figure 5.10-5	Hydrograph for Jackfish River below Christina Lake for the 2015 WY, compared to historical values.....	5-591
Figure 5.10-6	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-606

Figure 5.10-7	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in tributaries to the Christina River (seasonal data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-608
Figure 5.10-8	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Christina Lake and Gregoire Lake (seasonal data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-610
Figure 5.10-9	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the mainstem stations ( <i>test</i> stations CHR-1, CHR-2, CHR-2A, CHR-3, and <i>baseline</i> station CHR-4) of the Christina River watershed. ....	5-627
Figure 5.10-10	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in tributary stations ( <i>test</i> stations GRR-1, GRR-1, CHL-1, and JAR-1) of the Christina River watershed. ....	5-628
Figure 5.10-11	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in tributary stations ( <i>test</i> stations SAC-1, SUC-1, UNC-2, UNC-3, and <i>baseline</i> stations BRC-1 and SUC-2) of the Christina River watershed. ....	5-629
Figure 5.10-12	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River ( <i>test</i> stations CHR-1, CHR-2A, CHR-2, CHR-3, and <i>baseline</i> station CHR-4) (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-632
Figure 5.10-13	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in the tributary stations ( <i>test</i> stations JAR-1, SAC-1, SUC-1, UNC-2, UNC-3, and GRR-1, and <i>baseline</i> stations BRC-1 and SUC-2) of the Christina River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-634
Figure 5.10-14	Concentrations of selected water quality measurement endpoints in Christina Lake ( <i>test</i> station CHL-1) and Gregoire Lake ( <i>test</i> station GRL-1) (fall data) relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-636
Figure 5.10-15	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of depositional reaches, showing the lower <i>test</i> reach CHR-D1, middle <i>test</i> reach CHR-D2, upper <i>test</i> reach CHR-D3, and upper <i>baseline</i> reach CHR-D4 of the Christina River. ....	5-643
Figure 5.10-16	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach CHR-D1 in the Christina River relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-646
Figure 5.10-17	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach CHR-D2 in the Christina River relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-647
Figure 5.10-18	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach CHR-E/D3 and <i>baseline</i> reach CHR-D4 in the Christina River relative to the regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-648
Figure 5.10-19	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at erosional <i>test</i> reach CHR-E2A in the Christina River relative <i>baseline</i> reach variability. ....	5-649
Figure 5.10-20	Distribution of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach CHR-E2A in the Christina River relative to <i>baseline</i> reach CHR-E2A. ....	5-650
Figure 5.10-21	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing <i>test</i> reach SUC-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach SUC-D2. ....	5-654



Figure 5.10-22	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach SUC-D1 and <i>baseline</i> reach SUC-D2 of Sunday Creek, relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variation. ....	5-655
Figure 5.10-23	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower <i>test</i> reach SAC-D1 of Sawbones Creek. ....	5-660
Figure 5.10-24	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the <i>test</i> reach UNC-D2 (unnamed creek east of Christina Lake) and <i>test</i> reach UNC-D3 (unnamed creek south of Christina Lake). ....	5-662
Figure 5.10-25	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the <i>baseline</i> reach BIC-D1. ....	5-663
Figure 5.10-26	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach SAC-D1 of Sawbones Creek, and <i>test</i> reaches UNC-D2 and UNC-D3 of Unnamed Creek, relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-664
Figure 5.10-27	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>baseline</i> reach BIC-D1 of Birch Creek. ....	5-665
Figure 5.10-28	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of erosional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Jackfish River ( <i>test</i> reach JAR-E1). ....	5-670
Figure 5.10-29	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of erosional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Gregoire River ( <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1). ....	5-672
Figure 5.10-30	Distribution of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1 in the Gregoire River. ....	5-673
Figure 5.10-31	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach JAR-E1 of the Jackfish River relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-674
Figure 5.10-32	Variation in benthic invertebrate community key measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach GRR-E1 in the Gregoire River relative to <i>baseline</i> reach variability. ....	5-675
Figure 5.10-33	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of regional lakes, showing Christina Lake. ....	5-679
Figure 5.10-34	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach CHL-1 of Christina Lake relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-680
Figure 5.10-35	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints for Gregoire Lake. ....	5-684
Figure 5.10-36	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River, <i>test</i> station CHR-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-686
Figure 5.10-37	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River, <i>test</i> station CHR-D2, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-688

Figure 5.10-38	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River, <i>test</i> station CHR-D3, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-690
Figure 5.10-39	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River, <i>baseline</i> station CHR-D4, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-692
Figure 5.10-40	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Birch Creek, <i>test</i> station BRC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-694
Figure 5.10-41	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Sawbones Creek, <i>test</i> station SAC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-696
Figure 5.10-42	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Sunday Creek, <i>test</i> station SUC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-698
Figure 5.10-43	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the Sunday Creek, <i>baseline</i> station SUC-D2, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-700
Figure 5.10-44	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the unnamed creek east of Christina Lake, <i>test</i> station UNC-D2, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-702
Figure 5.10-45	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in the unnamed creek south of Christina Lake, <i>test</i> station UNC-D3, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-704
Figure 5.10-46	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Christina Lake, <i>test</i> station CHL-1, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-706
Figure 5.10-47	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Gregoire Lake, <i>test</i> station GRL-1, relative to historical concentrations.....	5-708
Figure 5.10-48	Variation in fish community measurement endpoints for <i>test</i> reach CHR-F2 in the Christina River, <i>test</i> reach JAR-F1 in the Jackfish River, and <i>test</i> reach SUC-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach SUC-F2 in Sunday Creek from 2012 to 2015, relative to regional <i>baseline</i> conditions.....	5-713
Figure 5.10-49	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health <i>test</i> reaches JAR-F1, SAC-F1, and SUC-F1 in the Christina River watershed, August to September 2015.....	5-720
Figure 5.10-50	Length-frequency distributions of slimy sculpin in wild fish health <i>test</i> reaches JAR-F1 and SUC-F1 in the Christina River watershed, fall 2015.....	5-721
Figure 5.10-51	Relative age-frequency distributions for slimy sculpin at <i>test</i> reaches JAR-F1 and SUC-F1 within the Christina River Watershed, fall 2015.....	5-722
Figure 5.10-52	Relationship between age (years) and body weight (g) of female and male slimy sculpin captured at <i>test</i> reach JAR-F1, fall 2015.....	5-723

Figure 5.10-53	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male slimy sculpin at <i>test</i> reach SUC-F1 and <i>test</i> reach JAR-F1 in the Christina River Watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-723
Figure 5.10-54	Relationship between age (years) and body weight (g) of female and male slimy sculpin captured at <i>test</i> reach SUC-F1, fall 2015. ....	5-724
Figure 5.11-1	Hangingstone River watershed. ....	5-727
Figure 5.11-2	Representative monitoring stations of the Hangingstone River watershed, fall 2015. ....	5-728
Figure 5.11-3	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for the Hangingstone River in the 2015 WY, compared to historical values. ....	5-737
Figure 5.11-4	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Hangingstone River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-741
Figure 5.11-5	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Hangingstone River watershed. ....	5-745
Figure 5.11-6	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in the Hangingstone River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-747
Figure 5.11-7	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of erosional reaches, showing the lower reach of the Hangingstone River ( <i>test</i> reach HAR-E1). ....	5-751
Figure 5.11-8	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach HAR-E1 in the Hangingstone River relative to regional <i>baseline</i> ranges of variability. ....	5-752
Figure 5.11-9	Daily mean temperatures for wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1, August to September 2015. ....	5-753
Figure 5.11-10	Length-frequency distribution of longnose dace at wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015. ....	5-754
Figure 5.11-11	Measurement endpoints for longnose dace at wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015. ....	5-755
Figure 5.11-12	Relative age-frequency distribution of longnose dace at wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1, fall 2015. ....	5-756
Figure 5.11-13	Relationship between age (years) and body weight (g) of female and male longnose dace at wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 in the Hangingstone River, fall 2015. ....	5-756
Figure 5.11-14	Growth of longnose dace at wild fish health <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015. ....	5-757
Figure 5.11-15	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male longnose at <i>test</i> reach HAR-F1 and <i>baseline</i> reach MR-U, fall 2015. ....	5-757
Figure 5.12-1	Pierre River Area watersheds. ....	5-759
Figure 5.12-2	Representative monitoring stations of the watersheds in the Pierre River area, fall 2015. ....	5-760

Figure 5.12-3	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Big Creek (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-769
Figure 5.12-4	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in the Pierre River area. ....	5-775
Figure 5.12-5	Selected water quality measurement endpoints at <i>baseline</i> stations BIC-1, EYC-1, PIR-1, and RCC-1 (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-777
Figure 5.12-6	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Big Creek, <i>baseline</i> station BIC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-785
Figure 5.12-7	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Pierre River, <i>baseline</i> station PIR-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-787
Figure 5.12-8	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Eymundson Creek, <i>baseline</i> station EYC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-789
Figure 5.13-1	Miscellaneous aquatic systems. ....	5-791
Figure 5.13-2	Representative monitoring stations of miscellaneous aquatic systems, fall 2015.....	5-792
Figure 5.13-3	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Fort Creek, McLean Creek, Horse River, Poplar River, and Beaver River (monthly data) in the 2015 WY. ....	5-821
Figure 5.13-4	Piper diagram of fall ion balance in Fort Creek, McLean Creek, and Horse River.....	5-826
Figure 5.13-5	Selected fall water quality measurement endpoints, Fort Creek and Alice Creek (fall data), relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-829
Figure 5.13-6	Selected fall water quality measurement endpoints, McLean Creek and Horse River, relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-831
Figure 5.13-7	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower reach of Fort Creek ( <i>test</i> reach FOC-D1).....	5-836
Figure 5.13-8	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> reach FOC-D1 of Fort Creek relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-837
Figure 5.13-9	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Fort Creek, <i>test</i> station FOC-D1 (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-839
Figure 5.13-10	The observed ( <i>test</i> ) hydrograph and estimated <i>baseline</i> hydrograph for Poplar Creek in 2015, compared to historical values.....	5-840
Figure 5.13-11	Hydrologic change classification of the Original Poplar Creek, 2015 WY.....	5-843
Figure 5.13-12	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in Poplar Creek and Beaver Creek. ....	5-849

Figure 5.13-13	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Poplar Creek and Beaver River (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-850
Figure 5.13-14	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities of depositional reaches, showing the lower reach of Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> reach POC-D1) and the upper reach of Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> reach BER-D2).....	5-855
Figure 5.13-15	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at the lower Beaver River ( <i>baseline</i> reach BER-D2) and upper Poplar Creek ( <i>test</i> reach POC-D1) relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-856
Figure 5.13-16	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at <i>test</i> station POC-D1, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-858
Figure 5.13-17	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints at <i>baseline</i> station BER-D2, relative to historical concentrations and to regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-860
Figure 5.13-18	Piper diagram of fall ion concentrations in in Alice Creek, Isadore's Lake, and Shipyard Lake. ....	5-861
Figure 5.13-19	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints, Alice Creek at the downstream wild fish health reach ( <i>baseline</i> station AC-DS), relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-864
Figure 5.13-20	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints, Alice Creek at the upstream wild fish health reach ( <i>baseline</i> station AC-US), relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations. ....	5-865
Figure 5.13-21	Daily mean water temperatures for wild fish health reaches in Alice Creek, August to September 2015. ....	5-866
Figure 5.13-22	Length-frequency distribution of lake chub in wild fish health reaches of Alice Creek, fall 2015. ....	5-867
Figure 5.13-23	Relative age-frequency distributions for lake chub at <i>baseline</i> reaches of Alice Creek, fall 2015. ....	5-868
Figure 5.13-24	Mean EROD activity ( $\pm$ 1SE) of female and male lake chub at <i>baseline</i> (AC-US and AC-DS) reaches on Alice Creek, fall 2015.....	5-870
Figure 5.13-25	Selected water quality measurement endpoints in Isadore's Lake and Shipyard Lake (fall data) relative to historical concentrations and regional <i>baseline</i> fall concentrations.....	5-872
Figure 5.13-26	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities in regional lakes, showing Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1). ....	5-877
Figure 5.13-27	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Isadore's Lake ( <i>test</i> station ISL-1) relative to the historical ranges of variability.....	5-878
Figure 5.13-28	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Isadore's Lake, <i>test</i> station ISL-1, relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-880

Figure 5.13-29	Ordination (Correspondence Analysis) of benthic invertebrate communities in regional lakes, showing Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1). .....	5-885
Figure 5.13-30	Variation in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in Shipyard Lake ( <i>test</i> station SHL-1) relative to the historical ranges of variability. ....	5-886
Figure 5.13-31	Variation in sediment quality measurement endpoints in Shipyard Lake, <i>test</i> station SHL-1, relative to historical concentrations. ....	5-888
Figure 5.14-1	a) pH and b) concentration of nitrates in all 50 acid-sensitive lakes combined, 2002 to 2015. ....	5-903
Figure 5.14-2	Control charts for acid-sensitive lakes showing significant trends in measurement endpoints identified in the Mann-Kendall trend analysis, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-909
Figure 5.14-3	Control charts of pH in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-914
Figure 5.14-4	Control charts of the sum of base cations in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-915
Figure 5.14-5	Control charts of concentration of sulphate in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-916
Figure 5.14-6	Control charts of concentration of dissolved organic carbon in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-917
Figure 5.14-7	Control charts of concentration of nitrates in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-918
Figure 5.14-8	Control charts of Gran alkalinity in five lakes in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-919
Figure 5.14-9	Control charts of concentration of dissolved aluminum in the five acid-sensitive lakes most at risk to acidification, 1999 to 2015. ....	5-920
Figure 6.1-1	Data sonde and hydrometric monitoring stations on the MacKay and Ells rivers. ....	6-3
Figure 6.1-2	Relationships between levels of turbidity and concentrations of total suspended solids for the Ells and MacKay rivers. ....	6-7
Figure 6.1-3	Relationships between levels of turbidity and concentrations of total suspended solids for all JOSMP sonde stations (2015 open-water period). ....	6-8
Figure 6.1-4	MacKay River sediment loads and balance in the 2015 monitoring period. ....	6-10
Figure 6.1-5	Ells River sediment loads and balance in the 2015 monitoring period. ....	6-12
Figure 6.2-1	Locations of expanded fish community monitoring activities conducted in support of the 2015 JOSMP. ....	6-19
Figure 6.2-2	Cumulative number of species caught by electrofishing for each sub-reach 1 to 10 and additional electrofishing effort. ....	6-31
Figure 6.3-1	Overview of sampling area and sampling reaches for the Athabasca Summer Fish Inventory Pilot Study. ....	6-35



Figure 6.3-2	Timing of the summer fish inventory pilot study relative to 2015 and historical (1957-2014) discharge of the Athabasca River. ....	6-36
Figure 6.3-3	Riparian habitat zones delineated in the Alberta Fish Survey Methods for Rivers (taken from ASRD 2011).....	6-37
Figure 6.3-4	Composition of fish communities in each reach of the pilot study, summer 2015.....	6-45
Figure 6.3-5	Size distributions of key sportfish species caught during the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-47
Figure 6.3-6	Age distributions of key sportfish species caught during the pilot study, summer 2015. ....	6-48
Figure 6.3-7	Catch composition of sportfish during the 2015 pilot study compared to previous summer inventories in the Athabasca River (1989 to 2014).....	6-50
Figure 6.3-8	Size distributions of walleye caught in the Athabasca River during the 2015 pilot study and in previous summer inventories (1989 to 2014).....	6-54
Figure 6.3-9	Size distributions of goldeye caught in the Athabasca River during the 2015 pilot Study and in previous summer inventories (1989 to 2014). ....	6-55
Figure 7.1-1	Changes in values of hydrologic measurement endpoints in the Athabasca River as a result of oil sands developments.....	7-6

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A	Estimating Area of Land Change for the Athabasca Oil Sands Region
Appendix B	Quality Assurance and Quality Control Procedures for the 2015 Water Year
Appendix C	Climate and Hydrology Component
Appendix D	Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality Component
Appendix E	Fish Populations Component
Appendix F	Acid-Sensitive Lakes Component
Appendix G	Special Studies

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

In 2012, the governments of Canada and Alberta developed a “Joint Canada-Alberta Implementation Plan for Oil Sands Monitoring” (Canada and Government of Alberta 2012) specific to the Athabasca oil sands region of northeastern Alberta. The implementation plan was to build and expand on existing environmental monitoring programs for the Athabasca oil sands region, including the Regional Aquatics Monitoring Program (RAMP, [www.ramp-alberta.org](http://www.ramp-alberta.org)). RAMP was implemented in 1997 as a multi-stakeholder aquatics monitoring program to assess the health of rivers and lakes within the Athabasca oil sands region and to assess potential cumulative effects of oil sands development. The intent of the new joint implementation plan was to enhance these monitoring activities and work to integrate environmental monitoring across all environmental components (i.e., air, water, land, and biodiversity), which were historically monitored independently through separate organizations or programs.

As part of the Joint Canada-Alberta Implementation Plan for Oil Sands Monitoring, the Joint Oil Sands Monitoring Plan (JOSMP, [www.jointoilsandsmonitoring.ca](http://www.jointoilsandsmonitoring.ca)) was initiated and executed from 2012 to 2015 to characterize the state of the environment in the Athabasca oil sands region, understand the cumulative effects of and changes to that environment, and develop recommendations for an integrated environmental monitoring program with an adaptive management framework for implementation. The RAMP Committees worked with the governments of Canada and Alberta to align aquatics monitoring activities historically undertaken by RAMP into the JOSMP, completing this process by April 1, 2014.

The Alberta Environmental Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting Agency (AEMERA, [www.aemera.org](http://www.aemera.org)) was established in 2014 and given the responsibility for the integration of all environmental monitoring in the province of Alberta, specifically to collect credible scientific data and other relevant information on the condition of Alberta’s environment and to provide the public with open and transparent reporting and access to the data and information. The intent of AEMERA is to provide timely collection and objective reporting of scientific data and information on air, land, water, and biodiversity, including information necessary to understand cumulative effects, in order to better inform the public, policy makers, regulators, planners, researchers, communities, and industries.

With the expiry in March 2015 of the “Joint Canada-Alberta Implementation Plan for Oil Sands Monitoring”, AEMERA assumed responsibility for the coordination and implementation of the JOSMP in the Athabasca oil sands region. The transition of the JOSMP to AEMERA in 2015 included an expansion of aquatics monitoring previously conducted under the JOSMP to provide an increased coverage of the Athabasca oil sands region, a greater sampling frequency, and an increase in potential contaminants examined.

This document reports on the results of aquatics monitoring conducted under the JOSMP by AEMERA and Hatfield Consultants (Hatfield) under the direction of AEMERA in the 2015 Water Year (WY: 1 November 2014 to 31 October 2015); this monitoring was implemented on the basis of monitoring study designs developed by AEMERA. In this report, the aquatics monitoring conducted under the JOSMP by AEMERA and Hatfield in the 2015 Water Year, and the analysis and reporting of the results of this monitoring, are collectively termed the 2015 Program.



The study area for the 2015 Program was defined as the major watersheds in the Athabasca oil sands region within which oil sands developments have been approved. Monitoring for the 2015 Program occurred as far south as the town of Athabasca and extended north to the Athabasca River Delta. The watersheds in which monitoring occurred in the 2015 Program included:

- lower Athabasca River;
- major tributary watersheds/basins of the lower Athabasca River including the Clearwater River, Christina River, Hangingstone River, High Hills River, Horse River, Gregoire River, Steepbank River, Muskeg River, MacKay River, Ells River, Tar River, Calumet River, and Firebag River;
- select minor tributaries of the lower Athabasca River (McLean Creek, Mills Creek, Beaver River, Poplar Creek, Fort Creek, Pierre River, Eymundson Creek, Redclay Creek, and Big Creek);
- select minor tributaries to Christina Lake (Sunday Creek, Birch Creek, Jackfish River, Sawbones Creek, and two unnamed creeks);
- a minor tributary of the lower Peace River catchment (Alice Creek), which flows into Lake Claire of the Athabasca River Delta;
- specific wetlands and shallow lakes in the vicinity of current or planned oil sands and related developments; and
- a selected group of 50 regional acid-sensitive lakes.

The study area also included the Athabasca River Delta as the aquatic receiving environment for any oil sands developments occurring in the Athabasca oil sands region.

The monitoring approach for the 2015 Program incorporated a combination of both stressor- and effects-based monitoring approaches. Using impact predictions from the various oil sands environmental impact assessments (EIAs), specific potential stressors were identified and monitored to document *baseline* conditions, as well as potential changes related to oil sands development. Examples include specific water quality variables and changes in water quantity. In addition, there was a strong emphasis in the 2015 Program on monitoring sensitive biological indicators that reflect and integrate the overall condition of the aquatic environment such as benthic invertebrate communities and fish populations. Combining both monitoring approaches enabled a more holistic understanding of potential effects on the aquatic environment related to the development of oil sands projects to be achieved.

The scope of the 2015 Program focuses on the following key components of boreal aquatic ecosystems:

1. Climate and hydrology, monitored to provide a description of changing climatic conditions in the Athabasca oil sands region, as well as changes in the water level of selected lakes and in the quantity of water flowing through rivers and creeks.
2. Water quality in rivers and lakes, monitored to identify anthropogenic and natural factors affecting the quality of streams and lakes in the Athabasca oil sands region and to assess the potential exposure of fish and invertebrates to organic and inorganic chemicals.

3. Benthic invertebrate communities and sediment quality in rivers, lakes, and the Athabasca River Delta, monitored because they reflect habitat quality, serve as biological indicators, and are important components of fish habitat.
4. Fish populations in rivers and select lakes, monitored as they are biological indicators of ecosystem integrity and are a highly valued resource in the region.
5. Water quality in regional lakes, monitored to assess potential changes in water quality as a result of acidification.

A weight-of-evidence approach was used for the analyses of monitoring data obtained in the field component of the 2015 Program by applying multiple analytical methods to interpret results and determine whether any changes have occurred due to oil sands developments. The analyses:

- were conducted at the watershed/river basin level, with an emphasis on watersheds in which development has already occurred, as well as the lower Athabasca River at the regional level;
- used a set of measurement endpoints representing the health and integrity of valued environmental resources within each component; and
- used specific criteria (criteria used in oil sands project EIAs, provincial and federal water quality and sediment quality guidelines, and environmental effects monitoring criteria) for determining whether or not a change in values and levels of measurement endpoints had occurred and the extent of the significance of any change with respect to the health and integrity of valued environmental resources. The magnitude of change in the values of measurement endpoints was described as **Negligible-Low**, **Moderate**, or **High** relative to *baseline* conditions (see the tabular summary following the Executive Summary for details regarding these criteria).

The 2015 Program Report uses the following definitions for monitoring status:

- **Test** is the term used in this report to describe aquatic resources and physical locations (i.e., stations, reaches) downstream of oil sands developments; data collected from these locations are designated as *test* for the purposes of data analysis, assessment, and reporting. The use of this term does not imply or presume that effects are occurring or have occurred, but simply that data collected from these locations are being tested against *baseline* conditions to assess potential changes; and
- **Baseline** is the term used in this report to describe aquatic resources and physical locations (i.e., stations, reaches, data) that are (in 2015) or were (prior to 2015) upstream of all oil sands developments; data collected from these locations are designated as *baseline* for the purposes of data analysis, assessment, and reporting.

Land change due to oil sands development activities that had occurred in the study area up to and including 2015 was estimated with satellite imagery in conjunction with more detailed maps provided by a number of oil sands companies. Land change in the study area as of 2015 was estimated to be approximately 128,486 ha, which was an increase of 4,496 ha from 2014. The total area of land change represented approximately 3.49% of the total area of the watersheds in which these oil sands development activities are occurring, compared to 3.47% in 2014. The percentage of the area of watersheds with land change as of 2015 varied from less than 1% for many watersheds (MacKay, Horse, Pierre River, and Upper

Beaver watersheds), to 1% to 5% for the Steepbank, Calumet, Firebag, Ells, Christina, and Hangingstone watersheds, to more than 10% for the Muskeg River, Fort Creek, Mills Creek, Tar River, Shipyard Lake, Poplar Creek, and McLean Creek watersheds, as well as for the smaller Athabasca River tributaries between Fort McMurray and the confluence of the Firebag River.

## ASSESSMENT OF 2015 WY MONITORING RESULTS

A tabular summary of the 2015 WY results by watershed and component is presented at the end of this Executive Summary.

### Lower Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Athabasca River was conducted at three *test* stations. The mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge in the 2015 WY were 1.1%, 1.8%, 0.7%, and 1.4% lower, respectively, in the Athabasca River observed (*test*) hydrograph than in the estimated (*baseline*) hydrograph. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the 2015 WY in the Athabasca River at ten *test* stations and one *baseline* station, and in the Athabasca River Delta at four *test* stations. Monthly data from 2015 indicate variations across months at all stations for most water quality measurement endpoints, with concentrations of TSS and associated nutrients and metals highest during freshet and concentrations of TDS and associated dissolved constituents highest during lower flows in the fall. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 for all stations monitored in the Athabasca River and Athabasca River Delta and regional *baseline* fall conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities and sediment quality were monitored in the Athabasca River Delta in fall 2015 at four depositional *test* stations. Variations in benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints compared to historical *baseline* conditions were classified as:

- **Negligible-Low** at Big Point Channel, Fletcher Channel, and Embarras River; and
- **Moderate** at Goose Island Channel on the basis of high abundances (greater than 120,000 individuals per m<sup>2</sup>) and the dominance of tubificids.

Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints were below guideline concentrations in fall 2015, with the exception of:

- total arsenic at *test* stations on the Embarras River and on the Athabasca River at Northlands and above the Muskeg River;
- Fraction 3 hydrocarbons at *test* stations on Goose Island Channel and the Embarras River; and
- predicted PAH toxicity at *test* stations on Big Point Channel, Embarras River, and on the Athabasca River at Northlands and above and below the Muskeg River, and at a *baseline* station on the Athabasca River at Poachers Landing.

Fall sediment quality results for stations monitored in 2015 on the Athabasca River mainstem and in the Athabasca River Delta were not classified. A Sediment Quality Index could not be calculated for these stations because there are no regional *baseline* concentrations for sediment quality for either the Athabasca River mainstem or the Athabasca River Delta against which the 2015 conditions could be assessed.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health monitoring was conducted in the Athabasca River in fall 2015 at five *test* reaches and four *baseline* reaches using trout perch as the target species. There was a concentration of changes in values of wild fish health measurement endpoints starting at the *test* reach below the Muskeg River confluence, becoming more prominent at the *test* reach above the Ells River confluence, and then dissipating at the *test* reach near the Athabasca River Delta. A similar spatial trend was found in liver enzyme activity (i.e., Ethoxyresorufin-O-deethylase [EROD] induction) of trout perch, measured to evaluate the potential exposure of fish to contaminants such as PAHs. When each monitoring reach was compared to the reach located immediately upstream (i.e., considered a “*baseline*” reach for comparison purposes in an effort to test for specific influences of interest), the classification of results for wild fish health was assessed as:

- **High** at *test* reaches below the Firebag River and above the Ells River;
- **Moderate** at *baseline* reaches at Poachers Landing, above Fort McMurray, and below Fort McMurray at Northlands, and at *test* reaches below the Muskeg River and near the Athabasca River Delta; and
- **Negligible-Low** at the *test* reach above the Muskeg River.

## Muskeg River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring of the Muskeg River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at 11 *test* stations and two *baseline* stations. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were +2.1%, +11.1%, -3.8%, and +4.6%, respectively, in the observed *test* hydrograph compared to the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. The differences in mean open-water discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were classified as **Negligible-Low** and the difference in mean winter discharge was classified as **Moderate**. The results of a quantitative longitudinal assessment of the Muskeg River suggest that the magnitude of hydrologic impacts was generally **Moderate to High** in the mid reaches of the Muskeg River between Jackpine and Stanley creeks and generally **Negligible-Low to Moderate** above Stanley Creek.

In the 2015 WY, the water level of Kearl Lake generally decreased for most of the water year, and stabilized from July to October, 2015. Lake levels were typically between the historical lower quartile levels and historic minimum levels, with occasional periods in summer that were below historic minimum levels.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the Muskeg River watershed in the 2015 WY at nine *test* stations on the Muskeg River, two *test* and two *baseline* stations on Jackpine Creek, one *test* station on Wapasu Creek, one *test* station on Stanley Creek, and one *test* station in Kearl Lake. At long-term monitoring stations in the Muskeg River mainstem and its tributaries, water quality was similar to previous

years, and concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints were within the range of *baseline* conditions. Monthly trends in water quality for 2015 at monitoring stations established in 2015 were similar to monthly trends in water quality at the long-term stations. Continuous monitoring data indicated higher concentrations of dissolved oxygen in lower-river stations than at stations located in slower-flowing, lentic stations further upstream on the mainstem. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Differences in water quality conditions at all stations in fall 2015 compared to regional *baseline* water quality conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in the Muskeg River in fall 2015 at one erosional *test* station and two depositional *test* stations, in Jackpine Creek at one depositional *test* station and one depositional *baseline* station, and in Kearl Lake at one depositional *test* station. Variations in the values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities were classified as:

- **Negligible-Low** at all *test* reaches of the Muskeg River: (i) the benthic invertebrate communities at these reaches in fall 2015 contained fauna typically associated with good environmental conditions; (ii) there were no significant differences in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance that also implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities; and (iii) none of the excursions in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in fall 2015 outside of normal ranges implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.
- **Negligible-Low** at the lower *test* reach in Jackpine Creek: (i) the benthic invertebrate community in fall 2015 contained a rich and diverse fauna, including several taxa that are typically associated with relatively good environmental conditions; (ii) none of the significant differences in values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities; and (iii) while the value of one of the six measurement endpoints in fall 2015 (equitability) was beyond the inner tolerance limit of the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of the normal range of values of prior years, the excursion did not imply degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.
- **Negligible-Low** at the *test* station in Kearl Lake: (i) the benthic invertebrate community in fall 2015 contained a diverse fauna and included several taxa that are typically associated with relatively good environmental conditions; (ii) none of the significant differences in values of measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities; and (iii) while values of three of the six measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were beyond the inner tolerance limit of the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of the normal range of values of prior years, none of these excursions outside of normal ranges implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Values of sediment quality measurement endpoints were within the range of regional *baseline* conditions at all stations within the Muskeg River watershed, with the exception of total metals and carbon-

normalized total PAHs at the middle *test* station on the Muskeg River, carbon-normalized total PAHs at the *baseline* station on Jackpine Creek, and total metals (when normalized to percent fine sediments) at the *test* station on Jackpine Creek. Sediment quality at all river stations within the Muskeg River watershed indicated **Negligible-Low** differences from regional *baseline* conditions. Sediment quality index values were not calculated for Kearl Lake because lakes were not included in the regional *baseline* calculations of sediment quality.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were assessed in the Muskeg River watershed in fall 2015 at one *test* reach in the Muskeg River, and at one *test* and one *baseline* reach in Jackpine Creek. Differences in measurement endpoints for fish communities were classified as:

- **Negligible-Low** for the *test* reach in the Muskeg River compared to regional *baseline* reaches: (i) there were no significant differences in values of fish community measurement endpoints that implied a negative change in the fish community, and (ii) the mean values of all measurement endpoints for fish community monitoring at the *test* reach in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* values.
- **Negligible-Low** at the lower *test* reach in Jackpine Creek: (i) there were no significant changes in values of fish community measurement endpoints that explained greater than 20% of the variance in annual means, and (ii) although there have been decreases in abundance at the *test* reach since 2010, abundance, CPUE, richness, and diversity were higher in 2015 compared to 2014, which may indicate improving conditions for fish communities.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health was assessed in fall 2015 at one *test* reach in the Muskeg River using lake chub as the target species. Because an upstream *baseline* reach on the Muskeg River was not sampled in 2015, quantitative comparisons for assessing potential effects could not be conducted; qualitative comparisons of values of wild fish health measurement endpoints were therefore made against regional *baseline* reaches in other watersheds where lake chub was monitored in 2015. Values of wild fish health measurement endpoints of female lake chub at the *test* reach in the Muskeg River were relatively similar to measurement endpoints of female lake chub at regional *baseline* reaches with the exception of relative liver size, which were smaller in fish at the *test* reach in the Muskeg River. Temporal comparisons were not possible because 2015 was the first year of fish health monitoring at this *test* reach.

## Steepbank River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Steepbank River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at two *test* stations. The 2015 WY, mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were all 0.44% lower in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality monitoring was conducted in the 2015 WY at five *test* stations on the Steepbank River. There were clear temporal variations in water quality measurement endpoints at individual stations across months in the 2015 WY. Concentrations of nutrients and metals had within-year temporal trends similar to the levels of particulates (i.e., total suspended solids), while concentrations of major ions had within-year temporal trends similar to trends in concentration of total dissolved solids.



Generally, water quality measurement endpoints in the 2015 WY fell within historical monthly ranges of available historical data. Continuous water quality data indicated consistently high dissolved oxygen and typically low turbidity at all monitoring stations. There were **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality conditions for all stations in fall 2015 compared to regional *baseline* water quality conditions. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were assessed in the Steepbank River in fall 2015 at one lower *test* reach and one upper *baseline* reach. Differences between values of fish community measurement endpoints at the lower *test* reach compared to *baseline* conditions were classified as **High** as three of the five measurement endpoints (abundance, richness, and CPUE) have significantly decreased over time; these significant trends explained more than 20% of the variation in annual means.

## Tar River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Tar River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station and one *baseline* station. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, maximum daily discharge, and minimum daily discharge were all 29.06% lower in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph for the Tar River near the mouth. These differences were classified as **High**. Differences in the values of the three hydrologic measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* cases were assessed as **High** from the mouth of the Tar River to approximately 6 km upstream, **Moderate** for the next 7 km upstream, and **Negligible-Low** for the next 7 km to the upper *baseline* station.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the 2015 WY at one *test* station and one *baseline* station on the Tar River. There were no obvious monthly trends in values of most of the water quality measurement endpoints at either station from May to October 2015. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. The ionic composition of water at both stations was consistent with historical observations and most water quality measurement endpoints were within the range of previously-measured concentrations and consistent with regional *baseline* concentrations. Water quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality for fall 2015 at both stations compared to regional *baseline* ranges.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in the Tar River in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach and one erosional *baseline* reach. Variations in the values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities of the Tar River were classified as **Moderate** at the lower *test* reach: (i) the benthic invertebrate community at the *test* reach in fall 2015 did not contain taxa typically associated with good environmental conditions, (ii) Ephemeroptera were missing from the benthic invertebrate community in fall 2015 and have not been present at the *test* reach since 2012, indicating a compromised community and degraded conditions; and (iii) two benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints had significant differences in values between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means and which implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Sediment quality was monitored in fall 2015 at the lower *test* station on the Tar River. Differences in sediment quality conditions in 2015 between the *test* station and regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low** as all sediment quality measurement endpoints at the *test* station in fall 2015 were within regional *baseline* concentrations. Concentrations of naphthalene, retene, and total parent PAH values in fall 2015 were below previously-measured minimums, while concentrations of the heavier hydrocarbon fractions (Fraction 3 and 4) exceeded previously-measured maxima. Concentrations of measurement endpoints of sediment quality were below guideline concentrations in fall 2015, with the exception of predicted PAH toxicity and the PAH hazard index. There have been significant increases in concentrations of Fraction 1, 2, 3, and 4 hydrocarbons at this *test* station over the period of the monitoring record.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were assessed in fall 2015 at one *baseline* reach in the Tar River. Mean values of all measurement endpoints were higher at the *baseline* reach in fall 2015 compared to fall 2014. Differences between values of fish community measurement endpoints at the lower *baseline* reach compared to the normal range of variability for *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low** because there were no significant changes in measurement endpoints that explained more than 20% of the variance in annual means.

## MacKay River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the MacKay River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station and three *baseline* stations. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were 0.009%, 0.021%, 0.016%, 0.021% higher, respectively, in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the MacKay River watershed in the 2015 WY at three *test* stations and two *baseline* stations on the MacKay River and at three *baseline* stations on the Dover River. There was generally low monthly variation in concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints between May and October in the 2015 WY. Concentrations of all water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 at long-term monitoring stations on the MacKay River were within previously-measured concentrations with the exception of total parent PAHs at the *baseline* station, with a measured concentration in fall 2015 that exceeded the previously-measured maximum concentration. The only significant trends in fall concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints were decreases in arsenic and sulphate at the *test* station near the MacKay River mouth. Concentrations of all water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the range of historical fall concentrations and regional fall *baseline* concentrations with the exception of a number of major ions at the Dover River stations with concentrations that exceeded the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations and total suspended solids at several stations with concentrations that were below the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations. Water quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality for fall 2015 at all stations in the Mackay River watershed compared to regional *baseline* ranges.

**Sediment Quality** Sediment quality was monitored in the MacKay River watershed in fall 2015 at two *test* stations and one *baseline* station on the MacKay River, and at three *baseline* stations on the Dover River. Values of all sediment quality measurement endpoints were below guideline concentrations at all stations of the Dover River and the upper stations of the MacKay River and, with the exception of total PAHs

(absolute and carbon-normalized) and the PAH hazard index level at the lower *test* station on the MacKay River, all sediment quality measurement endpoints were within the ranges of regional *baseline* conditions for stations within the MacKay River watershed. Sediment quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in sediment quality for fall 2015 at all stations in the Mackay River watershed compared to regional *baseline* ranges.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one *test* reach in the lower MacKay River. Differences in measurement endpoints of the fish community at the *test* reach were classified as **Negligible-Low**. There were no significant changes in measurement endpoints over time and mean values of most measurement endpoints for fish community monitoring at the *test* reach in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* values for these measurement endpoints. Species richness was above the regional *baseline* range, indicating a positive change.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health was assessed at two *test* reaches and one *baseline* reach in the MacKay River using longnose dace as the target species, and at three *baseline* reaches in the Dover River using lake chub as the target species. The classification of effects for reaches of the MacKay River was assessed as:

- **Moderate** for the lower *test* reach because an exceedance of the effects criteria associated with significant differences was measured in one of five measurement endpoints (relative liver size of male longnose dace) compared to the upper *baseline* reach in the MacKay River; and
- **Negligible-Low** for the middle *test* reach because no significant differences were measured in any of the measurement endpoints compared to the upper *baseline* reach in the MacKay River.

Reaches of the Dover River consisted solely of *baseline* reaches in fall 2015; therefore, no classification of results could be assessed.

## Calumet River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Calumet River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, maximum daily discharge, and minimum daily discharge were 4.24% higher, 0.25% lower, and 0.25% lower, respectively, in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the Calumet River in the 2015 WY at one *test* station and one *baseline* station. There were inconsistent within-year trends in the concentrations and levels of most of the water quality measurement endpoints at the lower *test* station from May to September 2015. Temporal trends in the concentrations of all major ions except potassium and sulphate were similar to temporal trends in the concentration of total dissolved solids, but temporal trends in concentration of particulate-associated metals were not similar to temporal trends in the concentration of total suspended solids. Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints were within previously-measured ranges for both stations. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Concentrations of all water quality variables were within the regional *baseline* concentrations in fall 2015, with the exception of total suspended solids. Water quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality for fall 2015 at both stations compared to regional *baseline* ranges.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach and one depositional *baseline* reach in the Calumet River. Variations in measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at the lower *test* reach were classified as **Negligible-Low**. Although values of benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints at the lower *test* reach differed from upper *baseline* reach, none of the differences indicated degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities at lower *test* reach. The lower *test* reach contained a rich and diverse benthic invertebrate community, with various genera of mayflies, stoneflies and caddisflies, which indicate good habitat quality.

Values of sediment quality measurement endpoints were within the range of regional *baseline* conditions with the exception of total PAHs (absolute and carbon-normalized) and total hydrocarbons at the lower *test* station and total metals at the *baseline* station, all of which exceeded the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations. Concentrations of Fraction 2 and 3 hydrocarbons, chrysene, and dibenz(a,h)anthracene in sediment exceeded the guidelines at the *test* station in fall 2015 while concentrations of Fraction 3 hydrocarbons and total arsenic exceeded the guidelines at the *baseline* station. Temporal trend analyses for sediment quality measurement endpoints were not possible for either station due to the limited years of historical data available. Sediment quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Moderate** and **Negligible-Low** differences in sediment quality for fall 2015 at the lower *test* station and the upper *baseline* station, respectively, compared to regional *baseline* ranges.

## Firebag River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring in the Firebag River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at two *test* stations and one *baseline* station, and the McClelland Lake levels were recorded at one *test* station. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were 0.50%, 0.52%, 0.22%, and 0.56% lower in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

The water level at McClelland Lake in winter of the 2015 WY was generally above historic maxima from November 2014 to mid-May 2015, when the annual peak lake level was recorded. Water levels then generally fell for the remainder of the water year. Water levels were above the median historic level until early August, and were between the mean and the lower historic quartile for the remainder of the water year.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the Firebag River watershed in the 2015 WY at two *test* stations and one *baseline* station on the Firebag River, as well as at one *test* lake (McClelland Lake) and one *baseline* lake (Johnson Lake). Water quality of the Firebag River and McClelland and Johnson lakes were similar to measurements in previous years, with similar water quality at upper and lower Firebag River stations and generally consistent monthly trends at all riverine and lacustrine stations. Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints and ion balance at all were within the previously-measured historical ranges. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Water quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality for fall 2015 at all stations on the Firebag River compared to regional *baseline* ranges. Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints for lake stations were not compared to regional *baseline* conditions given the ecological differences between lakes and rivers.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach in the Firebag River, one *test* lake, and one *baseline* lake. Variations in measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities were classified as:

- **Moderate** at the lower *test* reach in the Firebag River: richness in lower *test* reach was significantly lower in fall 2015 than the mean of all prior years; this difference accounted for more than 20% of the variation in annual means and was indicative of degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.
- **Negligible-Low** at McClelland Lake: (i) while there were statistically-significant temporal differences in values of benthic invertebrate community key measurement endpoints that accounted for more than 20% of the variation in annual means, none were indicative of degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities; (ii) values of all benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the inner tolerance limits for the normal range of variation of previous years; and (iii) the general composition of the community in terms of relative abundances of benthic taxa, presence of fully aquatic forms and presence of generally sensitive taxa, such as the mayfly *Caenis* and two types of caddisflies, suggested that the community of McClelland Lake was in good condition and generally consistent with *baseline* conditions.

The benthic invertebrate community of Johnson Lake in fall 2015 showed some variation in composition from 2014, with an increase in richness and the presence of EPT taxa, which were not observed in 2013. In addition, the presence of permanent aquatic forms such as amphipods, gastropods and bivalves indicated that Johnson Lake was in good condition for benthic invertebrate communities in fall 2015.

Sediment quality index values calculated at the lower *test* station on the Firebag River for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in sediment quality compared to regional *baseline* ranges. Values of sediment quality measurement endpoints were not compared to regional *baseline* concentrations for McClelland Lake or Johnson Lake because lakes were not included in the calculation of *baseline* concentrations.

## Ells River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Ells River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station and one *baseline* station. The 2015 WY mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were 0.15% higher in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. These differences are classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the Ells River watershed in 2015 WY at four *test* stations and two *baseline* stations on the Ells River, and in two *baseline* lakes: Gardiner Lake; and Namur Lake. Concentrations of a number of water quality measurement endpoints showed intra-year variation at both *test* and *baseline* stations, with concentrations of total suspended solids and associated nutrients and metals being highest in May and concentrations of total dissolved solids and associated ionic constituents being highest in July and August. Concentrations of most water quality variables were higher at Gardiner Lake than at Namur Lake. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Water quality index values calculated for fall 2015 indicated **Negligible-Low** differences in water quality



for fall 2015 at all stations on the Elys River compared to regional *baseline* ranges. Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints for Gardiner and Namur lakes were not compared to regional *baseline* conditions given the ecological differences between lakes and rivers.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach in the Elys River, and at depositional *baseline* stations in two lakes. Differences in measurement endpoints for the benthic invertebrate community at the *test* reach in the lower Elys River were classified as **Negligible-Low**: (i) significant increases in Correspondence Analysis (CA) Axis 1 scores over time were not indicative of degrading conditions, and (ii) all measurement endpoints were within the inner tolerance limits of the normal range of variation for previous years of sampling, with the exception of %EPT, which was not significantly different in fall 2015 than in previous years, signifying no change in conditions.

The benthic invertebrate communities of both Namur and Gardiner lakes in fall 2015 were consistent with relatively high quality benthic habitats, with the presence of Ephemeroptera and Trichoptera taxa and permanent aquatic forms (e.g., bivalves, gastropods).

Sediment quality was assessed in fall 2015 at three *test* stations and one *baseline* station on the Elys River, and two *baseline* lakes.

Differences in sediment quality index values calculated for stations on the Elys River for fall 2015, compared to regional *baseline* conditions were:

- **High** at the lower *test* station due to high concentrations of petroleum hydrocarbons and PAHs;
- **Moderate** at the *test* station near the mouth due to high concentrations of petroleum hydrocarbons and PAHs; and
- **Negligible-Low** at the middle *test* station and upper *baseline* station.

Sediment quality index values were not calculated for *baseline* stations in Namur Lake and Gardiner Lake because lakes were not included in the regional *baseline* calculations. No sediment guidelines or threshold values were exceeded at either lake station in 2015.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were monitored at one *test* reach in the Elys River. Differences in measurement endpoints for the fish community at the *test* reach were classified as **Negligible-Low**: (i) mean values of all measurement endpoints for fish community monitoring at the *test* reach in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* values for these measurement endpoints, (ii) while the statistically-significant decreases in abundance and the Assemblage Tolerance Index (ATI) over time from 2010 to 2015 are consistent with a potential negative change in the fish community at the *test* reach, less than 20% of the variance in annual means is explained by these decreasing trends.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health was assessed in fall 2015 at two *test* reaches and one *baseline* reach in the Elys River using lake chub as the target species. The classification of effects for reaches of the Elys River was assessed as:

- **Moderate** for the lower *test* reach because female lake chub were significantly younger than female lake chub at the middle *test* reach, and male lake chub were significantly younger than

both the middle *test* and upper *baseline* reaches and magnitude of these significant differences exceeded the Environment Canada effects criteria; and

- **Negligible-Low** for the middle *test* reach because there were no significant differences in values of measurement endpoints for wild fish health at middle *test* reach compared to the upper *baseline* reach.

## Clearwater River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Clearwater River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station and two *baseline* stations. The assessed hydrologic change classification for the Clearwater River was **Negligible-Low**, which was based on the calculated hydrologic change from the Christina River and then proportionally scaled to the increased watershed size in the Clearwater River.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the Clearwater River watershed in the 2015 WY at two *test* stations and one *baseline* station on the Clearwater River, and at one *baseline* station on the High Hills River. The ionic composition of water at all stations in the Clearwater River watershed in fall 2015 was similar to previous years. Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints measured in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* conditions. Differences in water quality conditions in fall 2015 compared to regional *baseline* conditions were:

- **Moderate** at the *baseline* station in the upper Clearwater River; and
- **Negligible-Low** at the lower *test* station on the Clearwater River and at the *baseline* station on the High Hills River.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in the Clearwater River watershed fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach and one depositional *baseline* reach in the Clearwater River, and at one erosional *baseline* reach in the High Hills River. Variations in measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities were classified as **Negligible-Low** at the *test* reach in the Clearwater River: (i) variations in CA Axis 1 scores at the *test* reach were unlikely to be related to oil sands development given similar trends were observed at both the *test* and *baseline* reaches, and (ii) the percentage of sensitive EPT taxa was higher at the *test* reach than at the *baseline* reach, indicating that conditions are not degrading in the lower Clearwater River. The benthic invertebrate community of the *baseline* reach in the High Hills River reflected good water and sediment quality, with a high diversity of typical riffle fauna including mayflies, stoneflies, and caddisflies.

Differences in sediment quality conditions in fall 2015 at both *test* and *baseline* stations in the Clearwater River watershed compared to regional *baseline* sediment quality conditions were **Negligible-Low**.

## Christina River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Christina River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at nine *test* stations and three *baseline* stations. The water balance analysis was conducted for the *test* station near the mouth. Water balance analysis showed that differences in mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge between the observed *test* and estimated *baseline* hydrographs were +0.05%, +0.06%, +0.06%, and +0.05%, respectively. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.



**Water Quality** Water quality was monitoring in the Christina River watershed in the 2015 WY at four *test* stations and one *baseline* station on the Christina River, four *test* stations, and two *baseline* stations on tributaries to Christina Lake, two *test* stations on tributaries to the Christina River, and two *test* lakes.

Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints in the Christina River and its tributaries exhibited relatively consistent seasonal changes, with total dissolved solids and dissolved ions lowest in May during freshet, and higher in months with lower flows. Concentrations of some water quality measurement endpoints (e.g., total dissolved solids, boron, sodium, chloride, and sulphate) were generally higher in each month at the lower *test* station on the Christina River and on Gregoire River than at other *test* and *baseline* stations. Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints were within the historical monthly ranges.

Concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within regional *baseline* concentrations with few exceptions, including total dissolved phosphorus, sodium, calcium, chloride, and total boron, which exceeded the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations the lower *test* station on the Christina River and on Gregoire River and *baseline* stations on the upper Christina River and Birch Creek. In contrast, concentrations of total suspended solids, total dissolved solids, total boron, total mercury, magnesium, and potassium were lower than the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations at *test* stations in Jackfish River, Gregoire River, Sawbones Creek and two unnamed creeks flowing into Christina Lake and at *baseline* stations in Birch Creek and Sunday Creek. The ionic composition of water at all stations in the Christina River watershed in fall 2015 was similar to previous years. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 at all stations in the Christina River and its tributaries compared to regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**. Classifications were not generated for *test* stations in Christina Lake and Gregoire Lake because lakes were not included in the regional *baseline* conditions given the ecological differences between lakes and rivers.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in the Christina River watershed in the 2015 WY at three depositional *test* reaches, one erosional *test* reach, and one depositional *baseline* reach on the Christina River, four depositional *test* stations and two depositional *baseline* stations on tributaries to Christina Lake, two erosional *test* stations on tributaries to the Christina River, and two depositional *test* lakes.

Variations in measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities in the Christina River were classified as:

- **Moderate** at the lower depositional *test* reach because while the benthic invertebrate community at the *test* reach in fall 2015 included several taxa that are typically associated with relatively good environmental conditions, values of all measurement endpoints for fall 2015 were outside the inner tolerance limits of the normal range of variation from previous years of sampling, including a lower %EPT than previous years.
- **Negligible-Low** at the middle depositional *test* reach because the significant difference in CA 1 Axis scores over time that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means did not imply degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities, and values of all measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the inner tolerance limits of the normal range of variation from previous years of monitoring.

- **Negligible-Low** at the upper depositional *test* reach because no significant changes in values of measurement endpoints at the *test* reach were measured between 2015 and 2014 and values of all measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the inner tolerance limits of the normal range of variation for regional *baseline* depositional reaches.

Variations in values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at the erosional *test* reach in the Christina River in fall 2015 were not classified because there are only two years of data for this station, which were collected eight years apart; during this time the reach changed from *baseline* to *test*.

Differences in values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities at reaches monitored in fall 2015 in Sunday Creek were classified as **High** because the results of temporal and spatial comparisons contain significant differences in values for three measurement endpoints – richness, equitability, and %EPT – for the *test* reach that explain more than 20% of the variation in annual means.

Variations in values of measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities monitored in fall 2015 in Sawbones Creek were classified as **Moderate** because there were significant differences in values of two measurement endpoints (abundance and %EPT) in the temporal comparisons that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means.

Variations in values of measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities at the two unnamed creeks that flow into Christina Lake were classified as **Negligible-Low** because there were no significant variations over time at the monitored reaches and values of all measurement endpoints in fall 2015 for the monitored reaches were within normal ranges for *baseline* reaches.

Variations in the values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities of the Jackfish River in fall 2015 were classified as **Moderate**. While the benthic invertebrate community in fall 2015 contained a benthic fauna that reflected good water and sediment quality, two of the three significant differences in values of measurement endpoints (taxa richness and %EPT) between 2015 and the mean of the prior years that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities. It should be emphasized that values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities for 2015 were adjusted to account for the change in sampling gear and this classification should be interpreted with caution.

Variations in the values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities of Gregoire River for fall 2015 were classified as **Negligible-Low**. The benthic invertebrate community monitored on the Gregoire River in fall 2015 contained a benthic fauna representative of a healthy erosional river and none of the significant differences in values of measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Variations in values of the measurement endpoints of the benthic invertebrate community in Christina Lake in fall 2015 were classified as **High** because there were significant differences in values of all measurement endpoints in the temporal comparisons that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means; it is worth noting that the lake in 2015 contained a diverse benthic fauna that included several permanently aquatic forms (e.g., clams, snails, amphipods), as well as several large aquatic insects (mayflies and caddisflies).

Differences in measurement endpoints of the benthic invertebrate community in Gregoire Lake in fall 2015 were classified as **Negligible-Low** given none of temporal comparisons for benthic invertebrate communities of Gregoire Lake accounted for significant variation.

In fall 2015, concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints were generally similar to previous years (where applicable) and were typically within regional *baseline* concentrations at all stations. Differences in sediment quality conditions in fall 2015 at all sediment quality stations in the Christina River watershed were **Negligible-Low** compared to regional *baseline* conditions. Sediment quality measurement endpoints were not compared to regional *baseline* concentrations for Christina Lake or Gregoire Lake because lakes were not included in the calculation of *baseline* concentrations.

**Fish Populations (Fish Communities)** Fish communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one *test* reach of the Christina River, four *test* reaches and two *baseline* reaches in tributaries to Christina Lake, and one *test* reach in Jackfish River. Differences in values of fish community measurement endpoints for the *test* reaches in the Christina River, Jackfish River and Sunday Creek were classified as **Negligible-Low** because: (i) there were no significant changes in values of measurement endpoints for these *test* reaches in either spatial comparisons to *baseline* reaches or in changes over time that implied a negative change in the fish communities at those reaches; and (ii) mean values of all measurement endpoints at these *test* reaches were within the ranges of regional *baseline* values for these measurement endpoints.

No spatial or temporal comparisons were conducted for Sawbones Creek or the two unnamed creeks flowing into Christina Lake; reliable statistical analysis was not possible for these reaches because too few fish have been captured at these reaches during the entire monitoring period. Similarly, comparisons of values of fish community measurement endpoints to regional *baseline* values were not made for these reaches.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health was assessed at one *test* reach in the Jackfish River, one *test* reach in Sawbones Creek, and one *test* reach on Sunday Creek using slimy sculpin as the target species. Classification of results for wild fish health monitoring in the Christina River watershed in 2015 was not possible because no *baseline* reaches were sampled in the Christina River watershed for the wild fish health component in 2015 and the target fish species, slimy sculpin, was not sampled at any regional *baseline* reach during the 2015 Program.

## Hangingsstone River Watershed

**Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Hangingsstone River watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at two *test* stations. For the 2015 WY, the differences in mean open-water discharge, mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge between the observed *test* and estimated *baseline* hydrograph for the Hangingsstone River were all 0.30%. These differences were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

**Water Quality** Water quality monitoring was conducted at two *test* stations on the Hangingsstone River in the 2015 WY. Monthly variation in water quality showed similar trends at both *test* stations, with concentrations of suspended solids and several associated nutrients and metals highest during freshet and lowest in September and October at open-water low flows, and concentrations of total dissolved solids and most dissolved ions and metals showing an inverse relationship with flow. Generally, concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints were higher at the lower *test* station than at the upper *test* station. Monthly water quality measurement endpoints at both stations were generally

within historical monthly ranges. Concentrations of all water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were lower than or within the previously-measured ranges except chloride at both stations (higher than previously-measured maximum concentrations), and naphthenic acids, oilsands extractable acids, and total alkylated PAHs at the upper *test* station (lower than previously-measured minimum concentrations). Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 between *test* stations and the regional *baseline* fall conditions were classified as **Moderate** for the lower *test* station and **Negligible-Low** for the upper *test* station.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored at one erosional *test* reach in the Hangingstone River. Variations in the values of measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities of the Hangingstone River were classified as **Negligible-Low** because values of all six benthic invertebrate community measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the inner tolerance limits of the normal range of *baseline* values for erosional habitats. In addition, the benthic invertebrate community in fall 2015 contained numerous taxa associated with good environmental conditions including a diverse and rich fauna.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health was assessed at the upper *test* reach of the Hangingstone River in fall 2015 using longnose dace as the target species. Because an upstream *baseline* reach on the Hangingstone River was not sampled in 2015, quantitative comparisons for assessing potential effects could not be conducted. To provide context to the results for the *test* reach on the Hangingstone River, qualitative comparisons of measurement endpoints were made with a *baseline* reach on the MacKay River that also used longnose dace as the target species. These comparisons indicated that longnose dace in the Hangingstone River were relatively younger with smaller relative gonad and liver sizes than longnose dace in the MacKay River. Temporal comparisons were not possible because 2015 was the first year of fish health monitoring at the upper *test* reach in the Hangingstone River.

## Pierre River Area

**Hydrology** Hydrometric data were collected in the 2015 WY from four *baseline* stations in the Pierre River area to develop hydrographs for each watershed but water balances were not completed given that there had been no oil sands development in the Pierre River area as of 2015.

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the 2015 WY at four *baseline* stations in the Pierre River area. Monthly water quality samples collected between May and September in Big Creek exhibited higher concentrations of total suspended solids, associated metals, and PAHs in May and June during high flows, and higher concentrations of dissolved constituents, total dissolved solids and associated major ions in fall during low flows. Concentrations and levels of water quality measurement endpoints at all four *baseline* stations in fall 2015 were generally within the range of available previously-measured concentrations and regional *baseline* conditions. Ion balance was similar to historical observations at all stations except the station in Big Creek, because a historically-low concentration of sulphate was measured at that station in fall 2015. Water quality guideline exceedances in the 2015 WY were consistent with water quality guideline exceedances identified by the RAMP and JOSMP in previous monitoring years. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 between *baseline* stations in Big Creek, Pierre River, and Redclay Creek and regional *baseline* fall conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**, while

differences in water quality in fall 2015 between the *baseline* station in Eymundson Creek and regional *baseline* fall conditions was classified as **Moderate**.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in fall 2015 at three depositional *baseline* reaches and one erosional *baseline* reach in the Pierre River area. The benthic invertebrate communities in Big Creek, Eymundson Creek, and Pierre River were typical of sandy-bottomed rivers with a high abundance of chironomids and worms, which are indicative of poor water quality conditions. EPT taxa were present, as were permanent aquatic forms. Overall, a decrease in the abundance of worms and an increasing proportion of EPT taxa indicated stable conditions. The benthic invertebrate communities in Redclay Creek had a lower proportion of tolerant worms and chironomids in 2015, indicating good habitat quality.

Sediment quality measurement endpoints were within the range of regional *baseline* conditions at all sediment quality stations in the Pierre River area, with the exception of total metals, carbon-normalized total PAHs, and normalized total metals at Eymundson Creek, normalized total metals at Pierre River, and carbon-normalized total PAHs at Big Creek. Differences between sediment quality in fall 2015 at all sediment quality stations in the Pierre River area and regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**.

## Miscellaneous Aquatic Systems

### *Fort Creek, McLean Creek, and Horse River*

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the 2015 WY at one *test* station on Fort Creek, one *test* station on McLean Creek, and one *test* station on the Horse River. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 between these *test* stations and regional *baseline* fall conditions were classified as:

- **Negligible-Low** at Fort Creek as concentrations of most water quality variables in fall 2015 were within regional *baseline* concentrations. Concentrations of a number of water quality measurement endpoints have increased over time in Fort Creek, particularly dissolved ions. Guideline exceedances occurred most frequently between July and September and included total phenols and sulphides, which have commonly exceeded guidelines in previous sampling years;
- **Negligible-Low** at McLean Creek: concentrations and levels of all water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* concentrations, with the exception of total dissolved solids and several associated ions, including calcium, sodium, chloride, and sulphate, all of which were higher than their respective 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations;
- **Negligible-Low** at Horse River: although there were seasonal fluctuations, concentrations of water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* concentrations.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were monitored in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach in Fort Creek. Variations in measurement endpoints for benthic invertebrate communities were classified as **High** because while the presence of clams, snails, and particularly of stoneflies in fall 2015 suggested that the quality of benthic habitat at the *test* reach is good, there were significant differences in values of three of the benthic invertebrate community

measurement endpoints (abundance, richness, and equitability) between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means and which suggested degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Differences in sediment quality conditions in fall 2015 between the *test* station on Fort Creek and regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**. Values of measurement endpoints of sediment quality at the *test* station on Fort Creek were below guideline concentrations in fall 2015, with the exception of Fraction 3 hydrocarbons and chrysene, and concentrations of all sediment quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015. Concentrations of measurement endpoints were within the ranges of regional *baseline* concentrations with the exception of total hydrocarbons, with a concentration that was above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of regional *baseline* concentrations.

### *Poplar Creek and Beaver River*

**Climate and Hydrology** Hydrometric monitoring for the Poplar Creek watershed in the 2015 WY was conducted at one *test* station and one *baseline* station. The 2015 WY mean winter discharge, annual maximum daily discharge, and open-water minimum daily discharge were all -0.25% less in the observed *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph. The mean open-water discharge was 43.12% higher in the *test* hydrograph than in the estimated *baseline* hydrograph and this difference was classified as **High**. The results of a longitudinal assessment suggested that the effects on mean open water flow that were classified as **High** occurred in the lowest 3.5 km of Poplar Creek. (i.e., the portion downstream of the Poplar Creek spillway).

**Water Quality** Water quality was monitored in the 2015 WY at one *test* station on the Poplar River and at one *test* and one *baseline* station on the Beaver River. In general, the highest concentrations of metals and ions occurred in December 2014 and August 2015 at the *test* station on the Poplar River while particulates and total metals at the *test* station on the Beaver River were highest in June 2015. Guideline exceedances occurred most frequently in September in the Poplar River while guideline exceedances occurred equally frequently in June, August, and September in the Beaver River. Concentrations of total phenols, sulphides, and dissolved iron exceeded guideline concentrations at all stations, while concentrations of total silver in January and total zinc in November exceeded water quality guidelines on the Poplar River. There were **Negligible-Low** differences between water quality conditions at all stations in fall 2015 compared to regional *baseline* conditions, with most water quality measurement endpoints within the ranges of regional *baseline* concentrations.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Benthic invertebrate communities were sampled in fall 2015 at one depositional *test* reach in Poplar Creek and one depositional *baseline* reach in the Beaver River. Variations in values of measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities at the *test* reach in Poplar Creek were classified as **Moderate**. While the benthic invertebrate community in Poplar Creek in fall 2015 was in generally good health, as evidenced by trends and levels of %EPT and had a range of fauna typical for a sandy-bottomed river, significant differences in values of equitability between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Differences in fall 2015 sediment quality conditions between the *test* station in Poplar Creek and the *baseline* station in Beaver River and regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**.



Sediment quality measurement endpoints were within the ranges of regional *baseline* conditions for both stations with the exception of total PAHs in sediments of the Beaver River. Concentrations of all sediment quality measurement endpoints were below guideline concentrations at the *baseline* station in the Beaver River in fall 2015 and concentrations of Fraction 3 hydrocarbons and chrysene exceeded published guidelines at the *test* station in Poplar Creek.

### *Alice Creek*

**Water Quality** Water quality monitoring was initiated in reaches of Alice Creek in fall 2015 at two *baseline* stations. Differences in water quality in fall 2015 between *baseline* stations in Alice Creek and regional *baseline* fall conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**, with most water quality measurement endpoints within regional *baseline* concentrations.

**Sediment Quality** Sediment quality monitoring was initiated in reaches of Alice Creek in fall 2015 at two *baseline* stations. Differences in fall 2015 sediment quality conditions between these stations and regional *baseline* conditions were classified as **Negligible-Low**. Concentrations of all sediment quality measurement endpoints were within regional *baseline* concentrations at both *baseline* stations in Alice Creek. Concentrations of all sediment quality measurement endpoints were below published guidelines at the lower *baseline* station, while predicted PAH toxicity and total arsenic concentrations exceeded guideline values at the upper *baseline* station.

**Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health)** Wild fish health monitoring was conducted at two *baseline* reaches in Alice Creek in fall 2015, using lake chub as the target species. Results from the lower *baseline* reach indicated that lake chub exhibited lower relative gonad size in females and a lower mean age and relative liver size in both males and females compared to the upper *baseline* reach.

### *Isadore's Lake*

**Water Quality** Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 at the *test* station in Isadore's Lake were within the range of previously-measured concentrations and concentrations and levels of water quality measurement endpoints were below water quality guidelines in fall 2015 with the exception of sulphide. Shifts in ion balance and significant increasing trends in concentrations of many dissolved ions suggest a gradual and ongoing change in water quality in Isadore's Lake over time.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Variations in values of measurement endpoint of the benthic invertebrate community in Isadore's Lake at the *test* station were classified as **Negligible-Low**. While there were a number of significant differences in values of measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means, none of these implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

**Sediment Quality** The following significant temporal trends in fall concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints were measured at the *test* station in Isadore's Lake: (i) increasing concentrations of Fraction 2, 3, and 4 hydrocarbons, total alkylated PAHs and total PAHs; and (ii) decreasing concentrations of total metals. Concentrations of all sediment quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 were within the ranges of regional *baseline* concentrations with the exception of Fraction 3 hydrocarbons and total arsenic.



## Shipyard Lake

**Water Quality** Concentrations of most water quality measurement endpoints in fall 2015 at the *test* station in Shipyard Lake were within previously-measured concentrations with the exception of sulphide. The ionic composition of water in Shipyard Lake has occasionally shifted toward influences of sodium and chloride, particularly in 2010, and also from 2013 to 2015. This observation is consistent with significant temporal trends of increasing concentrations of sodium, potassium, and chloride and a decreasing trend in calcium concentration.

**Benthic Invertebrate Communities and Sediment Quality** Variations in values of measurement endpoints of benthic invertebrate communities for the *test* station in Shipyard Lake in fall 2015 were classified as **Negligible-Low**. While there were a number of significant differences in values of measurement endpoints between *test* and *baseline* conditions that accounted for more than 20% of the variance in annual means, none of these implied degrading conditions for benthic invertebrate communities.

Significant temporal trends in concentrations of total hydrocarbons (Fractions 1, 2, 3, and 4) and total alkylated PAHs were measured in sediments in fall 2015 at Shipyard Lake. Concentrations of sediment quality measurement endpoints were below guideline concentrations, with the exception of Fraction 3 hydrocarbons; total arsenic, benz[a]anthracene, benzo[a]pyrene, chrysene, dibenz[a,h]anthracene, and phenanthrene.

## Acid-Sensitive Lakes

Results of the analysis of the acid-sensitive lakes in 2015 compared to the historical data suggested that there have been no significant changes in the water chemistry of the 50 lakes across the years of monitoring that could be attributed directly to acidification. These results were consistent with the revised estimates of potential acid input suggesting that only 19 of the 50 ASL lakes (all remote from the industrial developments) were actually exposed to acidifying deposition.

In 2015, there were no exceedances of the ASL effects criterion for any of the measurement endpoints in the Canadian Shield, West of Fort McMurray and Northeast of Fort McMurray subregions. These three subregions were classified as having a **Negligible-Low** indication of incipient acidification. The Stony Mountains, the Birch Mountains and the Caribou Mountains were classified as having a **Moderate** indication of incipient acidification largely because of increases in the sum of base cations; these increases in the sum of base cations were not attributed to catchment acidification but increases in alkalinity loadings to these lakes.

## SPECIAL STUDIES

Three studies were also conducted in 2015 in support of the JOSMP that are not part of the regular monitoring program:

1. Study to explore relationships between turbidity, total suspended solids (TSS), and discharge in tributaries to the Athabasca River: The objectives of the preliminary study were to: (i) calibrate levels of turbidity obtained from the data sondes to concentrations of TSS; and (ii) assess the value of collecting total TSS samples specifically along with discharge measurements, which has been conducted historically as part of the Climate and Hydrology component for the RAMP/JOSMP. The results suggested that site-specific relationships exist between turbidity and

TSS in the study area and that further turbidity-TSS calibrations for data sonde stations in the JOSMP network would be useful to characterize the *baseline* or current conditions, identify disturbances, and calculate sediment budgets between monitoring stations. Uncertainties associated with the derivation of continuous TSS data from a discharge record were deemed to be greater than the increase in uncertainty using computed discharge values with TSS samples collected during routine water quality sampling. Therefore, discontinuing TSS sampling along with manual discharge measurements would only marginally increase the uncertainty in any TSS-discharge relationship that is developed.

2. Expanded fish community study: The objective of the expanded fish community study was to test the adequacy of the historical methods used to sample fish communities under the RAMP/JOSMP by comparing the results obtained using the historical five sub-reach sampling approach with the results of an expanded ten sub-reach sampling approach that also used supplemental fishing methods. The results of the study demonstrated that additional information can be gained by expanding the fish sampling effort and that selective electrofishing can improve the ability to identify fish species present at a monitoring reach. The range of potential bias showed that measurement endpoint estimates calculated using the historical survey efforts can be half as much or double those estimated using expanded methods. In addition, estimates generated using an expanded ten sub-reach sampling approach allowed for more precise estimates of measurement endpoints. Selective electrofishing further increased the number of fish species caught at each monitoring reach, including sensitive species that were not recorded using the primary electrofishing methods.
3. Pilot program for evaluating the status of fish in the Athabasca River: The objective of the pilot study was to evaluate the feasibility of monitoring fish populations of the lower Athabasca River using the Alberta Fisheries approach for sampling key sportfish species (walleye, goldeye, lake whitefish, and northern pike), and more generally on the fish community as a whole, during the summer season. Catches of sportfish during the pilot study were low compared to previous summer inventories conducted by the RAMP/JOSMP, and were likely a result of the low water levels in the Athabasca River observed during summer 2015. Results of the pilot study confirmed that summer is typically a poor time to sample for most sportfish species in the study area as resident populations of targeted species are often low.

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Summary assessment of the 2015 aquatic monitoring results in the oil sands region, Alberta.

Watershed/Region	Differences Between <i>Test</i> and <i>Baseline</i> Conditions						Acid-Sensitive Lakes <sup>7</sup>
	Hydrology <sup>1</sup>	Water Quality <sup>2</sup>	Benthic Invertebrate Communities <sup>3</sup>	Sediment Quality <sup>4</sup>	Fish Communities <sup>5</sup>	Wild Fish Health <sup>6</sup>	
Athabasca River	○	○	-	-	-	○/○/●	-
Athabasca River Delta	-	○	○/○	n/a	-	-	-
Muskeg River	○/○	○	○	○	○	n/a	-
Jackpine Creek	nm	○	○	○	○	-	-
Stanley Creek	-	○	-	-	-	-	-
Wapasu Creek	-	nm	-	-	-	-	-
Kearl Lake	nm	n/a	○	n/a	-	-	-
Steepbank River	○	○	-	-	●	-	-
Tar River	●	○	○	○	n/a	-	-
MacKay River	○	○	-	○	○	○/○	-
Dover River	nm	○	-	○	-	n/a	-
Calumet River	○	○	○	○/○	-	-	-
Firebag River	○	○	○	○	-	-	-
Moose Creek	nm	-	-	-	-	-	-
McClelland Lake	nm	n/a	○	n/a	-	-	-
Johnson Lake	-	n/a	n/a	n/a	-	-	-
Ells River	○	○	○	○/○/●	○	○/○	-
Namur Lake	-	n/a	n/a	n/a	-	-	-
Gardiner Lake	-	n/a	n/a	n/a	-	-	-
Clearwater River	○	○/○	○	○	-	-	-
High Hills River	nm	○	n/a	-	-	-	-
Christina River	○	○	○/○	○	○	-	-
Sawbones Creek	nm	○	○	○	nm	nm	-
Sunday Creek	nm	○	●	○	○	nm	-
unnamed creeks (east and south of Christina Lake)	nm	○	○	○	nm	-	-
Birch Creek	nm	○	n/a	○	nm	-	-
Jackfish River	nm	○	○	-	○	nm	-
Gregoire River	nm	○	○	-	-	-	-
Christina Lake	nm	n/a	●	n/a	-	-	-
Gregoire Lake	nm	n/a	○	n/a	-	-	-
Hangingstone River	○	○/○	○	-	-	n/a	-
Pierre River	nm	○	n/a	○	-	-	-
Eymundson Creek	nm	○	n/a	○	-	-	-
Big Creek (Unnamed Creek)	nm	○	n/a	○	-	-	-
Redclay Creek	nm	○	n/a	-	-	-	-
Fort Creek	nm	○	●	○	-	-	-
Poplar Creek	○/●	○	○	○	-	-	-
McLean Creek	-	○	-	-	-	-	-
Horse River	-	○	-	-	-	-	-
Beaver River	-	○	n/a	○	-	-	-
Alice Creek	-	○	-	○	-	n/a	-
Mills Creek	nm	-	-	-	-	-	-
Isadore's Lake	nm	n/a	○	n/a	-	-	-
Shipyard Lake	-	n/a	○	n/a	-	-	-
Stony Mountains	-	-	-	-	-	-	○
West of Fort McMurray	-	-	-	-	-	-	○
Northeast of Fort McMurray	-	-	-	-	-	-	○
Birch Mountains	-	-	-	-	-	-	○
Canadian Shield	-	-	-	-	-	-	○
Caribou Mountains	-	-	-	-	-	-	○

Legend and Notes

- Negligible-Low change    "-" program was not completed in 2015 WY; nm – not measured in the 2015 WY
- Moderate change    n/a – classification not completed as there were no *baseline* conditions against which to compare or reach was sampled to add to regional *baseline*
- High change

<sup>1</sup> **Hydrology:** (i) Measurement endpoints were calculated on differences between observed *test* and estimated *baseline* hydrographs that would have been observed in the absence of oil sands developments in the watershed: 5% - Negligible-Low; ± 15% - Moderate; > 15% - High; (ii) Not all hydrology measurement endpoints were calculated for each watershed because of differing lengths of the hydrographic record for 2015. The hydrology results presented are for those measurement endpoints that were calculated; (iii) Mean Open-Water Season Discharge, Annual Maximum Daily Discharge, and Minimum Open-Water Season Discharge in the Muskeg River assessed as **Negligible-Low**; Mean Winter Discharge assessed as **Moderate**; (iv) Mean Open-Water Season Discharge in Poplar Creek was assessed as **High**, while Mean Winter Discharge, Annual Maximum Daily Discharge, and Mean Open-Water Season Discharge were assessed as **Negligible-Low**.

<sup>2</sup> **Water Quality:** (i) Classification based on adaptation of CCME water quality index; see Section 3.2.2.4 for a detailed description of the classification methodology; (ii) Water quality in the Clearwater River was assessed as **Negligible-Low** at the lower station, and **Moderate** at the middle station; (iii) Water quality in the Hangingstone River was assessed as **Moderate** at the lower station and **Negligible-Low** at the middle station.

<sup>3</sup> **Benthic Invertebrate Communities:** (i) Classification based on statistical differences in measurement endpoints between *baseline* and *test* reaches as well as comparison to regional *baseline* conditions; see Section 3.2.3.1 for a detailed description of the classification methodology; (ii) Benthic invertebrate communities in the Athabasca River Delta were assessed as **Negligible-Low** at Big Point Channel, the Embarras River, and Fletcher Channel, and **Moderate** at Goose Island Channel; (iii) Benthic invertebrate communities in the Christina River were classified as **Moderate** at the lower reach and **Negligible-Low** at all other reaches.

<sup>4</sup> **Sediment Quality:** (i) Classification based on adaptation of CCME sediment quality index (Section 3.2.3.2); (ii) Sediment quality in the Calumet River was assessed as **Moderate** at the lower reach and **Negligible-Low** at the upper reach; (iii) Sediment quality in the Ells River was assessed as **Moderate** near the mouth, High at the lower reach, and **Negligible-Low** at the middle and upper reaches.

<sup>5</sup> **Fish Populations (Fish Communities):** Classification based on exceedances of measurement endpoints from the regional variation in baseline reaches (Section 3.2.4.1).

<sup>6</sup> **Fish Populations (Wild Fish Health):** (i) Classification based on exceedances of measurement endpoints from the regional variation in baseline reaches (Section 3.2.4.2); (ii) Classification for the Athabasca River was based on exceedances of measurement endpoints at each monitoring reach relative to the reach located immediately upstream on the Athabasca River (i.e., considered a "*baseline*" reach for comparison purposes) in an effort to isolate potential effects related to specific influences of interest; see Section 3.2.4.2 for a detailed description of the classification methodology. Wild fish health in the Athabasca River was assessed as **Negligible-Low** above the Muskeg River, **Moderate** in reaches between Poachers Landing and Northlands (below Fort McMurray), below the Muskeg River and near the Athabasca Delta, and **High** in reaches above the Ells River and below the Firebag River; (iii) Wild fish health in the MacKay River was assessed as **Moderate** at the lower reach and **Negligible-Low** at the middle reach; (iv) Wild fish health in the Ells River was assessed as **Moderate** at the lower reach and **Negligible-Low** at the middle reach.

<sup>7</sup> **Acid-Sensitive Lakes:** Classification based on the frequency in which values of seven measurement endpoints in 2015 were more than twice the standard deviation from their long-term mean in each lake.