IN THE CASE OF TAR SANDS OIL – OILS WELL, WILL CERTAINLY NOT END WELL

Canada's growing interest in exporting some of the dirtiest crude oil in the world is a threat to not only North America's wildlife but also a rational energy policy and a stable atmosphere. NASA and climate scientist James Hansen called this project a climate game-changer because burning Alberta "tar sands" oil could raise CO2 levels in the atmosphere by 200 parts per million (ppm), pushing us dangerously away from the 350 ppm safety net that he and other scientists have recommend (we are currently at 390 ppm of CO2 and rising at about 1-2 ppm per year).

If President Obama approves the proposed pipeline connecting the Alberta tar sands to refineries in the Gulf Coast (over 1700 miles away), it will show that oil runs thicker than environmental and human health concerns. The so-called Keystone XL pipeline may only be the beginning of more such projects to come. Another pipeline, known as the Enbridge (named for the oil company) pipeline, would connect Alberta tar sands oil with refineries in coastal BC, traversing First Nation's and other pristine lands over a distance of nearly 800 miles.

To extract the tar sands oil, hot freshwater is combined with caustic soda and mixed with petro-laden sands dug out of the earth by giant excavating shovels. Boreal forests that get in the way are leveled in the process. The slurry is then piped to extraction areas where oil is skimmed off the top and toxic tailings sent to ponds where they pose wildlife hazards. The resulting process has been labeled the dirtiest oil on earth not only because it requires 2-5 barrels of freshwater for every barrel of bitumen (crude) extracted, but because in the extraction process 10-45% more greenhouse gas pollutants are emitted. The oil then needs to be shipped long distances via subsurface pipelines, introducing ground disturbances and possible pipeline leaks to farmlands, forests, and wildlife migratory pathways, including those of the endangered whooping crane. On July 27, 2010 an Enbridge pipeline spewed 800,000 gallons of oil into the Kalamazoo River (largest spill in Midwest history) and on July 2, 2011 a pipeline operated by Exxon Mobil leaked unknown quantities of oil into the pristine Yellowstone River causing local evacuations.

There is no denial that the topic of the moment, whether on Main Street, Wall Street, or the Halls of Congress, is jobs. And while the oil business generates thousands of jobs, it comes with a high cost to future jobs, future economies, life-giving freshwater, boreal forests, and marine life (should a spill occur). What would tomorrow's labor force think of our quest today for jobs if myopic decisions set the stage for oil spills that will decimate commercial fishing, tourism, marine life, and freshwater?

Simply put, the more we depend on fossil fuel extraction, the further we are from transitioning to sane, rational, and sustainable connections to the very basic life-giving provisions in the natural world that sustain us. Nature has limits, our atmosphere has limits; inevitably, water will someday be worth far more than oil. Destroying boreal forests to extract oil, which absorb massive amounts of carbon, will also add to greenhouse gas pollutants, raising our procrastination penalty even further.

President Obama can block this project. For the plan to go forward, the President must sign off on it (and Congress has no role in that decision). This is a critical test for an administration that has so far failed to show the strong leadership on environmental issues that the nation—and voters—expected. Conservation groups have been protesting in front of the White House to make their point about dirty oil being a threat to the nation's environmental security and that this pipeline is just bad politics (for more information go to www.350.org). The insatiable demand for fossil fuels by the US as well as China (which is the destination of much of the oil from tar sands) will someday come back to haunt us as it already has in the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and other tragic oil spills. Ultimately, maybe the dinosaurs will have the last laugh, as we liberate extracted molecules from their long-decayed buried bodies that now trap sunlight and cook the planet!

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