

OIL SANDS PIPELINES, HERE?



The development of the Alberta, Canada oil sands could bring tar-filled pipelines and tankers to the Great Northwest; explore below and help inform the dialogue.

OIL SANDS DEVELOPMENT IS A GLOBAL ISSUE

The world's biggest oil companies have gobbled up a chunk of wilderness in northern Alberta, Canada bigger than England, so that they can extract the mixture of sand, clay, tarry oil, and water known as bitumen. It may seem like an issue that is of interest mainly to Canadians, but the worldwide attention that the bitumen mining operations have been receiving is warranted. After all, climate change doesn't recognize human borders.

Climate change is not the only issue, but it's a big part of the problem, especially considering the pace and scale of the fossil fuel developments. To begin, extracting the tarry bitumen is far more energy-intensive than extracting conventional oil. The Alberta oil sands represent the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, with more than five per cent of Canada's emissions coming from oil sands plants and upgraders. That doesn't take into account the climate change impacts of destroying the large swaths of ancient northern boreal forest above the oil, transporting the bitumen to refineries in the U.S., or burning the oil for fuel.

Impacts on wildlife, water, and the health of communities, many of them aboriginal, in the area are also well-known.

But the bigger problem is that by rapidly developing and exploiting this resource, and developing more infrastructure to transport and refine it, we are digging ourselves deeper into a fossil-fuel-dependent hole. The massive amounts of capital invested could be used to help shift to cleaner energy sources, with regulated oil sands development providing fuel for years to come while we make the transition.

So, the climate impacts will affect people everywhere, including the Pacific Northwest. But another worry for people along the West Coast of Canada and the U.S. will be the increased tanker traffic if the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline project goes ahead.

The pipeline is proposed by Enbridge Inc., with support from major oil companies including Chinese state-owned companies, to carry bitumen from the oil sands to Kitimat, B.C., eventually for export to China and elsewhere. Much of it will be shipped to refineries in the U.S., increasing the risks of a catastrophic spill along the entire west coast. Federal regulatory hearings into the proposal started on January 10, 2012 and are expected to take up to two years.

People in the U.S. have a big stake in the oil sands, but they also have a lot of influence over the way development proceeds, as is clear from the recent protests and small victory over the Keystone XL Pipeline project, which would carry bitumen from the oil sands to refineries in Texas. Building and using the Keystone pipeline to capacity will result in a 50 per cent increase in oil sands production. It will also increase the risks of disastrous spills along the pipeline's route, which would run from Alberta, Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and through Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

It's time to start weaning ourselves from fossil fuels. It won't be easy, but the oil sands give us a place to start.

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