

WTE Column of April 24, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Keystone XL enemy of sustainability"

In Wyoming, a movement is gathering steam to oppose the Keystone XL pipeline. Organized under NoKXL, participants plan to demonstrate in Cheyenne this coming Friday at 10:30 AM in front of the State Capitol. Concurrent with opposing KXL, the group wishes to send a message to Wyoming's governor and legislators to act speedily on climate change.

Made up of members of the Wyoming Sierra Club, UW student organizations, Unitarian Universalists from both Laramie and Cheyenne, Climate Parents and other organizations, members are fighting to keep tar-sands products out of our environment. Rather, they insist that Wyoming's government work for a sustainable future.

Friday's protest also supports Cowboy Indian Alliance, a group of ranchers, farmers, tribal members, friends and supporters, who rode into Washington DC earlier this week. All are now camped near the White House, urging President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry to reject the Keystone XL pipeline. The DC protest continues through Saturday.

KXL is the biggest test yet of President Obama's commitment to act on climate. Upon the State Department's issuing its National Interest Determination, which will propose to grant—or withhold—the permit for TransCanada to build the pipeline, agencies like the EPA, the Department of Interior, and others have 15 days to weigh in and disagree before it becomes the president's final decision.

Meanwhile Americans have submitted millions of comments opposing KXL. Thousands have risked arrest, demanding that the president reject the pipeline.

An independent analysis by Carbon Tracker Initiative found the climate impact to be nearly four times higher than the State Department's EIS projections. It will add up to 1.4 billion metric tons of CO₂ to our atmosphere over 50 years, the equivalent of the annual emissions of almost 300 million cars.

While supporting their fellow protesters in DC, the local group also focuses on Wyoming leaders' inaction. For instance, Climate Parents was founded in response to legislators' attempt to withhold funding from the State Department of Education to keep it from implementing Next Generation Science Standards. "It's wholly inappropriate," says Marguerite Herman, "to censor indispensable learning via political maneuvers." She now lobbies for legislative action to rescind the budget footnote with its restrictions.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'm an action lead for NoKXL, here is my take on it: By questioning the reality of climate change and our contribution to it as humans, we lose what little time is left to stabilize the climate and avert the worst.

Climate change is about droughts and the farms that go out of business because they can't grow crops or feed livestock. It's about floods, wildfires, and mudslides. It's about people losing their homes, their farms, their livelihoods.

97 percent of climate scientists agree that human-induced climate change is a scientific reality.

Attendant climate disruptions bring loss of life, starvation, and poverty to untold humans around the globe. The stories of how people's lives are affected are powerful reminders of why we need to take action, state-wide as well as at the level of federal government.

“Our world faces an unprecedented environmental, social, and economic challenge,” states a recent Sierra Club report that calls for a national climate-action plan to keep dirty fuels in the ground. “Top scientists agree that climate disruption is primarily due to the release of billions of tons of carbon dioxide and methane from fossil fuels. World leaders in 2008 set a target of no more than a 2-degree Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) rise in global temperatures as the upper limit to avoid climate catastrophe. Even that upper limit will result in catastrophic events: significant sea level rise, superstorms, drought, and extinctions.

“Current annual global emission rates of 31 billion tons of carbon dioxide will push us past this 2-degree Celsius tipping point by 2030. Global carbon pollution must be drastically reduced.”

Sierra Club’s local findings warn that the Powder River coal formation and the Green River oil shale formation are among the world’s largest potential “climate disrupters,” explaining:

“Spread across the three states of Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah is the Green River Formation, a fossil-fuel-rich-remnant of prehistoric aquatic life. Currently drilled for oil and gas, this formation is also the focus of speculative efforts to develop oil shale and tar sands. Companies with oil-shale and tar-sands leases on state lands are aggressively pursuing projects to show that oil-shale and tar-sands extraction is commercially viable.”

Shale oil can be harvested by strip mining the shale rock, heating it in large pits to extract the oil, then transporting the hot oil mix in heated trucks. It’s as socially and environmentally toxic as tar-sands mining, the latter explicated in Andrew Nikiforuk’s book “Tar Sands” (winner of the Rachel Carson Environmental Book Award) and the award-winning film “White Water, Black Gold.” What we’re in for, should the Green-River scheme go forward: horrific negative impacts to climate, wildlife, and water.

Last year, in response to a Sierra Club challenge, the Obama administration released a BLM plan that reduces the federal land available in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming to 677,000 acres for oil shale leasing and 140,000 acres for tar sands leasing. Sierra Club is adamant that the BLM withdraw all plans for oil shale and tar sands development on federal lands.

Ditto for state lands, which is one reason why Wyomingites will demonstrate on Friday.