

WTE Column of February 7, 2014. Editor's Headline: "U.S. Enables Canada with Keystone"

A movement is underway in Wyoming to resist TransCanada's Keystone XL (KXL) pipeline, which is to carry tar-sands bitumen from Alberta across the U.S. to refineries and shipping ports on the gulf coast. Canada's Premier, Stephen Harper, has lobbied mightily for U.S. collaboration; however, because the pipeline crosses international borders, it's up to President Obama to approve or reject the behemoth line.

The latest State Department EIS says tar sands exploitation will continue and its products shipped no matter what; therefore, KXL is the lesser of two evils. A lengthy report in the July 2013 of Scientific American, however, predicts quite the opposite.

Bitumen is the molasses-like, highly corrosive tar, the mining of which uses infinitely more freshwater, and leaves vastly bigger greenhouse-gas footprints, than conventional petroleum extraction. The tarry gunk is thinned with dilutants to make it flow; hence, the name "dilbit." It's the dirtiest source of fuel on the planet. As Canada's number one consumers, all Americans are implicated, not only in the social and environmental havoc the tar-sands boom has wrought in Canada but also in the devastating spills, explosions, and contaminations brought on by its transports in Canada and the U.S.

In January, dilbit began to flow through the southern leg of the pipeline, which TransCanada's CEO Russ Girling called "the safest oil pipeline built in America to date." Yet as of November, TransCanada had already fixed dents and bulges in that pipeline 125 times, according to a report by non-profit consumer-rights group Public Citizen. Girling also admitted to reporters that the company "voluntarily agreed" to 57 conditions with the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA).

Jeffrey Weise, PHMSA's head of pipeline safety, acknowledged last year that his agency "has very few tools to work with" and that the regulatory process he oversees is "dying." The Wall Street Journal released an analysis recently that people discover pipeline spills far more often than the leak-detection technology touted by companies. Based on PHMSA data for 251 pipeline incidents over four years, the Journal found that nearby residents or company employees were nearly three times as likely to detect a pipeline leak, whereas leak-detection software, special alarms, and control-room monitoring discovered leaks just 19.5 percent of the time. Bad times lie ahead.

U.S. extractive companies are chomping at the bit to exploit tar deposits in Utah. U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch eagerly promotes his state's "unconventional" fossil fuels. Problem is, Utah's tar deposits are thinner and more deeply embedded than those in Alberta; hence, their extraction would be even more energy-extensive, plus requiring volumes of fresh water that Utah simply doesn't have. Nor is the state eager to duplicate Alberta's notorious tailing ponds, which have leached heavy metals and poisonous chemicals into the province's aquifers, not to mention the birds that alight only to drown in the toxic ponds.

Utah politicians and tar-sands corporations figured they'd let Canada do the dirty work. Utah's Asphalt Ridge has devised a centrifugal approach to make toxic slush "dry" by spinning out its waste-water. Syncrude has used the method successfully in an Alberta pilot project. Now the fossil folks in Utah think it's time for their move.

Andrew Nikiforuk's "Tar Sands" compares Alberta's human, ecological, and economic wastage to a "bungled bank job" and an "economic weapon of mass destruction." Beyond the social and environmental devastation, the rapid development of tar sands has turned our northern neighbor into an "intolerant petrostate." The provincial and federal governments have mismanaged their oil wealth so completely, Nikiforuk found "daunting deficits" and tax burdens severe enough to undermine the very functioning of Canada's economy. Overly accommodative rules and underfunded administrations have resulted in failure to collect billions in royalties and revenues. Murray Smith, Alberta's U.S. ambassador, openly acknowledged to a Texas crowd in 2006: "The royalty structure for oil sands is we 'give it away' at a one percent royalty structure." As for revenue, Alberta fails to collect \$2 billion annually, though its infrastructure debt had reached \$7 billion by 2006, says the author.

Alberta's Department of Energy is managed like the U.S. Department of the Interior, which does not work for U.S. citizens but for oil companies, writes Nikiforuk: "U.S. tax payers lost more than \$10 billion to oil companies" because of "royalty breaks for offshore drilling," while Canada's losses equal its national debt. Worse, in the absence of long-term planning, Albertan and Canadian politicians have failed to secure energy supplies for their own nation. Tar sands development enriches a few powerful companies while depleting Canada's natural-gas and fresh-water supplies at frightening speed. Nikiforuk estimates that producing one barrel of tar-sands gunk moves a ton of earth and consumes 1400 cubic feet of natural gas, which may deplete Canadian supplies by 2030, while current permits allow industry to suck 2.3 billion of barrels of fresh water annually. "Canada stands to leave its people a singular legacy of exponential neglect and watershed destruction."

The U.S. is Canada's accomplice. America will "expand this environmental freak show" in the same way we "funded Saudi extremism"—when, "with constrained use, the U.S. could transform the tar sands project into what it should be: a second line of defence [sic] against dwindling oil supplies." The U.S. must become serious about lessening "its deadly reliance on oil," Nikiforuk warns. "It's a national security imperative."

Hence, U.S. protesters resist via #NoKXL, even in Wyoming. I recently gave a workshop in Cheyenne and am slated for Laramie later in February. You may email me for further information.