

Alberta tar sands

Greenpeace Canada Climate and Energy Campaign

photo by Ishi Dinim



Fish and game animals are so poisoned by the toxins, they smell like burning plastic when cooked in a frying pan.

The Alberta tar sands: an area of land roughly the size of England where the world's big oil companies create about one million barrels of synthetic crude oil every day, while destroying a vast area of the boreal forest. In this industrial zone, the smell alone burns the nostrils and brings tears to one's eyes.

The tar sands are the world's second largest fossil fuel resource, next to Saudi Arabia. With oil at \$80 a barrel, multinational oil companies all want a piece of the toxic pie. Unfortunately, the federal and Alberta governments are so happy to have them exploiting the tar sands that they ignore the health and environmental costs. The federal government also ignores the need for an effective policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

It is telling that this addiction to oil has spurred companies like Shell, Syncrude and Suncor to find a way to make synthetic crude out of a raw material at the bottom of the barrel of petroleum resources. The favourable Alberta royalty rate, one of the lowest in the world, is certainly an added bonus for operating in the tar sands.

The evil alchemy that produces a single barrel of usable oil from the heavy, tar-like bitumen requires massive amounts of energy and water – about half a billion cubic feet of natural gas and three barrels of water. Every day, the tar sands use enough natural gas to heat six million Canadian homes and are licensed to divert more than twice as much water as the city of Calgary uses in a year. An independent study by world-renowned water expert Dr. David Schindler reported that toxic leaking from tar sands operations is equal to a major oil spill every year. The production of synthetic oil from the tar sands is part of the global crisis causing climate change. It is also poisoning First Nations communities downstream.

Despite committing to the world, through the Kyoto Protocol, that Canada would cut its climate change emissions by 2012, they are now about 30 percent higher, with more than two years to go. The profit-driven motive of the Alberta and federal governments in promoting the tar sands is a big reason for climate inaction.

There are more problems. A study by the US-based National Academy of Science suggests pollution from Alberta's oil sands is nearly five times greater than, and twice as widespread, as industry figures report.

Researchers say the open-pit mines, roads and other facilities in the tar sands area are destroying so much bird habitat that, within 50 years, 166 million songbirds will have disappeared from Canada's skies.

The lack of protection for migrating birds is a problem in Alberta. In April 2008, 1,600 ducks died after landing on a massive Syncrude tailings lake, a toxic stew made of by-products from its oil operations. Syncrude is now in court defending this as a mistake, but not a crime. Interestingly, the federal prosecutor in the case has said in court that under federal law, the very existence of these tailings ponds is illegal. Yet the Alberta and federal governments allow them to continue to grow without effective regulation. In fact, these tailings ponds now span more than 130 square kilometres.

Nowhere are the effects of leaking from the tailings ponds (11 million litres a day) felt more profoundly than in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta's oldest community, situated downstream from Fort McMurray, the centre of tar sands operations. This First Nations community has existed there for thousands of years, living off the land. But now the fish they pull from the Athabasca River and Lake are often poisoned and covered in cancerous sores. The children can no longer swim in the lake and the wildlife they once hunted is disappearing.

According to a study by Environmental Defence in 2008, fish and game animals are so poisoned by the toxins, they smell like burning plastic when cooked in a frying pan.

Canada is now the number one supplier of oil to the US, which uses 25 percent of the world's energy. The development of the tar sands to this level of dirty oil production happened without effective public dialogue or debate. Is this the Canada you want the world to see? One that violates First Nations treaty rights and ignores both its climate change commitments and its public that wants climate action? A country that favours catering to multinational corporations over the desires of its own citizens? We didn't think so.

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