

Alberta's Tar Sands Nightmare: Environmental Catastrophe Looms

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The tar sands mining project in Alberta, Canada, is possibly the largest industrial project in human history and critics claim it could also be the most destructive. The mining procedure for extracting oil from a region referred to as the "tar sands," located north of Edmonton, releases at least three times the CO₂ emissions as regular oil production procedures and will likely become North America's single largest industrial contributor to climate change.

Most of the oil produced by the project will likely be consumed by the United States, a country that, along with Canada, is already heavily invested, on many levels, in the project.

The project is operated by Imperial Oil, whose parent company, ExxonMobil Canada, has a long-term production goal of more than 300,000 barrels of bitumen (extra heavy oil) per day. To do this, they will require new equipment to be shipped through the United States.

Trucks and trailers moving specialized, nontoxic mining equipment from where it is manufactured in Korea to the Kearl oil sands project, located in the Athabasca oil sands in northeastern Alberta, are slated to use highways in Idaho and Montana to transport the gear. This would happen after it has been shipped across the Pacific Ocean to Portland, Oregon, where it would then be barged up the Hood and Snake Rivers to Lewiston, Idaho, from which it would be hauled over land into Canada.

Pius Rolheiser, a spokesman for Imperial Oil, said this is the most cost-effective method of moving the equipment, much to the chagrin of many residents in these states.

The basis of most opposition to this idea is that the tar sands project will contribute so heavily toward worsening climate change. There are other criticisms as well, like those aimed at the size of the equipment to be shipped along routes that are designated "wild and scenic" highways that wind precariously through fragile ecosystems.

"We can speculate that this will have a significant impact on Bull Trout habitat, an endangered species and on Grizzly Bear habitat, which the EA [Environmental Agency] in Montana has noted as an issue from the construction itself, sediment buildup, paving equipment and such," Nick Stocks, co-founder of the group Northern Rockies Rising Tide in Missoula, Montana, a group that promotes local, community-based solutions to the climate crisis and takes direct action toward confronting what it sees as the root causes of climate change, told Truthout.

"In Montana the construction of new pullouts and the repaving and upgrading of existing pullouts is cause for much concern along the Montana portion of Highway 12," Stocks added. "Community members and organizations have

fought to clean up both of these areas and protect them as the wild and scenic places they are. New construction, new turnouts and this proposed new corridor all run contrary to decades of work and investment the community has had in maintaining these places. The risk of spill, mitigation procedures and sediment issues in the rivers have not been adequately taken into account.”

The “modules” from Korea comprise loads that are more than 150 feet long, approximately 30 feet high, 25 feet wide and weigh roughly 500,000 pounds. The giant trucks that will move these are from the Dutch company Mammoet (Dutch for mammoth). The rigs are so tall they do not fit under highway overpasses, are so wide they take up two traffic lanes and the estimated top speed of transporting them is 30 miles per hour. The trucks are 12 times the size of normal tractor-trailer trucks and each one has 48 tires.

Much of the designated route for transport contains only two lanes, with little or no shoulders, and would have to be modified by adding pull-out lanes, removing overhead power lines and traffic lights, as well as moving signs.

“Where are these industrial mega-rigs going to find the room to construct pullouts along the Northwest Scenic Passage Byway?” Brett Haverstick with the group Friends of the Clearwater, said to Truthout. His group is a nonprofit whose mission states that it works to “defend the Idaho Clearwater Bioregion’s wildlands and biodiversity through a forest watch program, litigation, grassroots public involvement, outreach and education.”

Highway 12 in Idaho runs through what is known as “Wild Clearwater Country,” which is “the northern half of central Idaho’s Big Wild” that “contains many unprotected roadless areas and wild rivers and provides crucial habitat for countless rare plant and animal species” according to the group.

“As it stands, the highway is only two lanes wide, with the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River hugging one shoulder and the other being right up against granite cliffs or forested lands,” Haverstick, who is the education and outreach director of the group continued, “There is no place to build a pullover along many stretches of the route.”

Stocks told Truthout that Imperial Oil’s current plan is to have all the construction completed in time for the test run and that much of it is already occurring.

“Members of the Nez Perce tribe and individuals were kept in the dark regarding the reason behind expanding the highway, but many now feel that the expansion was driven through in preparation for this Corridor,” Stocks continued, “More specifically, Idaho doesn’t have the same environmental review process that Montana does where transportation issues are concerned. There has been no review of the damage that might be caused by building the equivalent of a 30 foot wide asphalt football field every two miles.”

Haverstick shares similar concerns.

“Let’s say the pullovers are somehow, someway, modified to fit these behemoth rigs. Is it a good idea to have these 200 foot long, 25 feet wide, 30 feet high drilling rigs parked next to a Wild & Scenic River? What if the pullout cannot support the weight of these 500,000 plus-pound trucks and the road or shoulder collapses and the rig dumps into the Lochsa River? Then what are you going to do? What a potential disaster.”

Under the current proposal, 200 of these loads will be transported across Idaho and Montana during a 12- to 18-month period that could start by the end of this year. A test run is slated to occur by the end of this summer.

Rolheiser said Imperial Oil has spent about two years looking at the most cost-effective way to get the prefabricated equipment from Korea and the Montana-Idaho route is the best option.

The oil company's plan involves one to two trucks per day using US highways 12 and 200 through Idaho and Montana, theoretically only at night so as to minimize disturbing traffic patterns. Imperial Oil has already given briefings to many local officials along the proposed route.

Yet, this idea also brings up other concerns.

"It sounds pretty goofy to me," said Missoula County Commissioner Jean Curtiss, who heard about the monster-rig plan when Imperial made a presentation to the county commission in late 2009. "Think of what would happen if they hit ice on Rogers Pass?"

"Obviously, the safety of the people transporting the equipment and the safety of the public are paramount," spokesman Rolheiser said at the time, "If we didn't think it was safe, we wouldn't do it."

Haverstick feels there is more to be concerned about, in addition to public safety.

"This project should alarm people, whether they live in the states in which this project is being transported through or not," he told Truthout, "In 1803 President Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis & William Clark to find the Northwest Passage, the link between the Missouri River and the Columbia River through the unexplored Rocky Mountains. US Highway 12 was designated the Northwest Passage Scenic Byway because it parallels the exact route that Lewis & Clark traveled over two hundred years ago. Besides the highway itself, much of the primitive landscape remains the same. This Wild & Scenic River corridor is not only home to the proud and honorable people of the Nez Perce Nation, but it's the heart and soul of our American heritage."

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and Idaho Department of Transportation (IDT) agencies have the ultimate authorities to approve the plan.

MDT director Jim Lynch said Imperial won't get a green light for the plan unless it follows state laws and regulations, mitigates traffic problems and proves that roads and bridges won't be damaged, among other issues. Lynch said MDT has also asked the oil company to do an environmental review.

"It's important that they [Imperial] recognize they have to follow Montana environmental law and address the impacts and that they discuss the plans with communities to make sure communities are least impacted," Lynch said.

Critics of the plan do not believe there is anything Imperial can do to make it possible to carry forward with the project in a way that poses no risk of damage to wilderness, rivers, wildlife and ecosystems along the transport route.

There is much doubt that a thorough and honest environmental impact assessment will be possible before the project begins if the company intends to stay on schedule.

“If we allow this shipping project to go through, the result will be the creation of a heavy use high-and-wide corridor that will be used to ship mining equipment to the Alberta tar sands for decades,” Stocks told Truthout, “As much as the MDT and Imperial Oil want to argue the opposite, this is not a one time deal. The environmental review process thus far has refused to take into account the full scope of the proposed Kearsy project and its ramifications as the catalyst for all the needed construction for this Corridor. In fact, the MDT and Governor Brian Schweitzer have refused to acknowledge the possibility that this route will be used as a future transportation corridor even though the MDT gave a presentation to the Montana Legislature last year regarding the development potential of such a ‘high-and-wide corridor’ through our state and the Exxon’s role in the project.”

Imperial Oil has stated it will cover the costs of the trucking project, which will entail hundreds of changes to the route before the massive loads could pass through the area concerned without causing damage.

As an example, in Missoula County alone, a briefing with Missoula County commissioners found that Imperial plans to relocate utility lines at about 230 crossings and place 77 of them underground, make 16 fixes on one street (including moving signs and traffic signals), build or modify dozens of turnouts so the rigs can pull over to let traffic pass.

The equipment is to be used to mine the tar sands that are mixtures of soil, water and bitumen. Northern Alberta contains the largest known deposits of tar sand, with an area roughly the size of Florida that lies under some of the largest old-growth forest remaining in the world. It is believed the area contains 1.7 trillion barrels of oil, an amount equal to the world’s currently known reserves of conventional oil.

The exploitation of the tar sands is the most rapidly growing sector of the petroleum industry and is speeding up as the cost per barrel of oil increases, making the project more appealing, given that it currently requires more energy to extract the oil than the oil itself provides.

The tar sands project has raised great concern from environmental groups around the world, in addition to those in Montana and Idaho.

“The Tar Pit Sands project is one giant nightmare,” Haverstick said, “There are major social, environmental, economic, legal and political consequences. And it’s just not a local issue, but global. This project affects every living being, human or non-human on the planet. The carbon footprint is enormous, possibly bigger than anything we’ve seen before.”

Haverstick feels, “in a time when we are supposed to be working toward reducing our carbon footprint, scaling back the amount of carbon dioxide we pump into the atmosphere and searching and developing renewable energies, this project instead puts us back another hundred years, if not more. From a carbon emissions footprint, Tar Sand Mining may be the filthiest form of energy production we know of. And that’s not including the ecological damage that occurs when drilling for this stuff. Who knows what type of condition the remaining Boreal Forest in Alberta, Canada and the surrounding watershed will be in when this project is completed in 50 years. It will be on par with, if not much worse off than

mountain-top removal projects occurring in West Virginia right now.”

There are approximately 100 tar sand projects (comprised of 3,200 mining leases, covering an area the size of Maryland) planned in Canada, with at least \$200 billion dollars already invested.

“The tar sands themselves have been called the most destructive industrial project on the face of the planet for good reason,” Stocks, whose group is active on four continents and growing, told Truthout, “The devastation of this mining to the Alberta boreal forest, the Athabasca River, the Athabasca Delta and the communities, both First Nations and not, have been well documented.”

Indigenous communities both downstream from the tar sand mines in Canada as well as those along the proposed trucking route of the mining equipment are concerned about threats to their physical health, sacred sites and the health of their land base.

Some First Nations people who live downstream from the tar sands mines in Canada are reporting increased incidence of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, multiple sclerosis and rare types of cancer due to toxic wastes leaching into the waterway from tailings ponds. Also arsenic, at 33 times the acceptable level, is being found in game meats that First Nations people rely on, as well as some animals being found with tumors and mutations.

The mining of the tar sands, being as much solid as they are liquid, requires great effort. The easiest method is strip mining, though some newer mines heat and dilute the bitumen underground to make it flow easier. Once removed from the ground, bitumen is too viscous to flow through pipelines as conventional crude does, thus, it is next converted into synthetic oil to aid transport. These processes can use huge quantities of water and require so much electricity that one tar sand mine has considered building a nuclear power plant to power the mine itself.

“For Montana, the successful development of this shipping corridor is synonymous with Montana complacency in the destruction of Alberta and the impact that continued mining has on climate change,” Stocks added about the role the shipping corridor would play toward contributing to climate change. “In Montana, further climate change means more beetle killed forests, fewer glaciers, reduced springtime stream flow and more extensive fires in summer. Agricultural lands already feel the impact of drought and our forests feel the impact of warmer winters. It doesn’t matter what industry you belong to in our state, climate change is all inclusive.”

Research shows that tar sands mining causes an extraordinary and often permanent, detriment to the environment. Air monitoring near Fort McMurray, Alberta, for example, has recorded excessive levels of toxic hydrogen sulfide, as well as nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide and particulate matters.

Tar sand exploiter, Suncor Energy, received an Environmental Protection Order from the government of Alberta in 2007 as a result.

While the MDT does not yet know what level of environmental review will be required before issuing the permits to transport the mining equipment, MDT Director Jim Lynch has said that only the direct impacts these shipments will have on the state will be considered for issuance.

That means that the MDT environmental review will specifically ignore any concerns about the effects of tar sand mining, or the oil economy on environment.

The permits, if issued, will net Montana and Idaho a few hundred thousand dollars each, but critics claim the economic impact of traffic delays alone could exceed that amount.

The modification of the roadways is believed to require just a few months of construction, thus, job creation from the project will be minimal and temporary.

The success or failure of the initial test run scheduled for this summer in Idaho will determine whether the rest of the permits will be issued.

Haverstick and Stocks say their groups, along with many others, intend to fight the project.

“We have been engaging in building a network opposed to these shipments that runs the length of the route,” Stocks said, “From the Port of Vancouver to the Port of Sweetgrass we hope to build a viable opposition to these shipments that will take many different forms of action to stop them.”

Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist, is the author of “The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan,” (Haymarket Books, 2009), and “Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq,” (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from occupied Iraq for nine months as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last five years.

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