

Excerpt: 'Tar Sands', by Andrew Nikiforuk

Declaration of a Political Emergency

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Date: October 21, 2008

The world's oil party is coming to a dramatic close, and Canada has adopted a new geodestiny: providing the United States with bitumen, a low-quality, high-cost substitute.

Northern Alberta's bituminous sands, a national treasure, are the globe's last great remaining oil field. This strategic boreal resource has attracted nearly 60 per cent of all global oil investments. Every major multinational and nationally owned oil company has staked a claim in the tar sands.

Neither Canada nor Alberta has a rational plan for the tar sands other than full-scale liquidation. Although the tar sands could fund Canada's transition to a low-carbon economy, government has surrendered the fate of the resource to irrational global demands. At forecast rates of production, the richest deposits of bitumen will be exhausted in forty years.

Nations become what they produce. Bitumen, the new national staple, is redefining the character and destiny of Canada. Rapid development of the tar sands has created a foreign policy that favours the export of bitumen to the United States and lax immigration standards that champion the import of global bitumen workers. Inadequate environmental rules and monitoring have allowed unsustainable mining to accelerate. Feeble fiscal regimes have enriched multinationals and given Canada a petrodollar that hides the inflationary pressures of peak oil. Canada now calls itself an "emerging energy superpower." In reality, it is nothing more than a Third World energy supermarket.

Investment in the tar sands, including pipelines and upgraders, now totals approximately \$200 billion.* The tar sands boom has become the world's largest energy project, the world's largest construction project, and the world's largest capital project. No comprehensive assessment of the megaproject's environmental, economic, or social impact has been done.

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Thanks to rapid tar sands development, Canada now produces more oil than Texas or Kuwait. Since 2001, Canada has surpassed Saudi Arabia as the largest single exporter of oil to the United States. Canadian crude now accounts for nearly one-fifth of all U.S. oil imports. If development continues unabated, Canada will soon provide the fading U.S. empire with nearly a third of its oil, while half of Canada's own citizens remain dependent on insecure supplies from the Middle East.

Rapid tar sands development has become a central goal of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), an elite plan to create a North American economic union. U.S. energy policy openly advocates for more pipelines and transmission lines to ease growing shortages in energy supply for U.S. citizens, who currently consume 25 per cent of the world's oil. Representatives from the Mexican government attended meetings in 2006 in Houston, Texas, about rapid tar sands development. Rapid energy integration will inescapably lead to political integration in a North American union dominated by the United States.

Bitumen is a signature of peak oil and a reminder, as every beer drinker knows, that the glass starts full and ends empty. Half of the world's cheapest and cleanest oil has been consumed. The reality of depletion now demands the mining of the dirtiest. It takes the excavation of two tons of earth and sand to make one barrel of bitumen.

Each barrel of bitumen produces three times as much greenhouse gas as a barrel of conventional oil. The tar sands explain why the Canadian government has spent more than \$6 billion on climate-change programs for the last fifteen years and met not one target.

Bitumen is one of the world's most water-intensive oil products. Each barrel requires the consumption of three barrels of fresh water from the Athabasca River, which is part of the world's third-largest watershed. Every day, Canada exports one million barrels of bitumen to the United States and three million barrels of virtual water.

Industry in the tar sands uses as much water every year as a city of two million people. Ninety per cent of this water ends up in the world's largest impoundments of toxic waste: the tailings ponds. Industrial water monitoring on the Athabasca River is a fraud. Canada has no national water policy and one of the worst records of pollution enforcement of any industrial nation.

The tailings ponds, located along the Athabasca River, leak or seep into groundwater.

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For the last decade, the downstream community of Fort Chipewyan has documented rare cancers.

To mine or steam out bitumen, the tar sands industry burns enough natural gas every day to heat four million homes. At this rate of consumption, the project could severely compromise the nation's natural gas supplies by 2030.

The rapid depletion of natural gas in the tar sands is driving Canada's so-called nuclear renaissance. Canada may well become the first nation to use nuclear energy not to retire fossil fuels but to accelerate their exploitation.

Bitumen development will never be sustainable. The megaproject will eventually destroy or industrialize a forest the size of Florida and diminish the biological diversity and hydrology of the region forever.

Oil hinders democracy and corrupts the political process through the absence of transparent reporting and clear fiscal accounting. Alberta, a classic petrostate, has one of the least accountable governments in Canada as well as the lowest voter turnout.

Without long-term planning and policies, Canada and Alberta will fail to secure reliable energy supplies for Canadians, to develop alternative energy sources for the country, or to create valuable resource funds for the future. Unlike the governments of Norway and Alaska, the government of Canada stands to leave its citizens a singular legacy of exponential neglect and watershed destruction.

A business-as-usual case for the tar sands will change Canada forever. It will enrich a few powerful companies, hollow out the economy, destroy the world's third-largest watershed, industrialize nearly one-quarter of Alberta's landscape, consume the last of the nation's natural gas supplies, and erode Canadian sovereignty.

The destructiveness of the tar sands is not inevitable. But Canadians and Albertans have become too tolerant of the politicians who compromise the nation's energy security as well as the next generation's future. Instead of liquidating the tar sands for global interests, Canada can use the resource for transition to a lowcarbon economy.

Every Canadian who drives a car is part of this political emergency. And every Canadian can be part of the solution.

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The real work of transforming Canada's fossil fuel-dependent economy will not be big and glamorous. It will be humbling, yet rewarding. Our tasks, as social critic Wendell Berry has noted, "will be too many to count, too many to report, too many to be publicly noticed or rewarded, too small to make anyone rich or famous."

We must begin today.

Originally posted at: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20081021/tar_sands_081021/20081021?hub=CanadaAM
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