



Tar Sands Discussion Questions

Here are some questions and information to help facilitate a discussion on the tar sands.

1. Do you agree that the development of the tar sands is a Canadian issue? Are there any impacts of the tar sands in your community and province?

- The tar sands produce three times as much greenhouse gases (GHGs) as conventional oil production and are the fastest growing source of GHGs in Canada.
- Pipelines are being planned to bring tar sands crude from Alberta to ports in B.C. and to bring clean burning natural gas from Alaska and the Northwest Territories to fuel the tar sands.
- There are refineries in Alberta and Ontario that process tar sands crude that contribute to GHG emissions and pose risks to water depletion and contamination. The tar sands also contribute to acid rain in Alberta and Saskatchewan.
- Workers migrate from Atlantic Canada to the tar sands.

2. The tar sands have been referred to as an economic engine in Canada. Do you agree? What does this mean for Canadians?

- Canada has some of the lowest royalty rates in the world and public subsidies to the oil and gas industry persist, the federal government spends close to \$1 billion annually on subsidies to the oil and gas industry.
- There are long-term economic impacts of tying our economy to finite resource development without collecting the necessary revenues through royalties, taxes and other methods to invest in diversifying our economy, or supporting vital social services and planning for the eventual bust of a finite resource boom.
- Countries like Norway collect two to three times more revenue per barrel than Canadian jurisdictions.
- More than half of the tar sands is foreign-owned, including big oil businesses like Exxon and Shell as well as other countries' national oil companies, meaning energy profits are heading out of our country.

3. Should trade agreements be allowed to limit the federal and provincial governments' choices in directing energy policy in the interests of Canadian's energy and environmental security? How do you think NAFTA relates to the tar sands?

- Under NAFTA, market forces drive Canada-U.S. trade in energy, with NAFTA limiting the ability of the Canadian government to intervene in energy trade except in extraordinary circumstances. One of the main implications has been a division of energy production from consumption in Canada. Two-thirds of the oil produced in Canada and close to 60 per cent of the natural gas are exported to the U.S. It is estimated that 75 per cent of tar sands production is sent south to the U.S.
- NAFTA's proportional sharing clause (Article 605) obliges Canada to continue exporting non-renewable hydrocarbons to the U.S. in the same proportion of total supply as were sold to the U.S. Canadians' energy security could become compromised if, for example, energy imports were cut or if we were faced with the reality of an energy crisis.

- The investor-state provisions in NAFTA act both preventively as well as punitively in undermining strong environmental and labour standards. These provisions allow corporations to sue member governments for compensation in secretive NAFTA trade tribunals, not state courts, over almost any state measure that impacts predicted profits.
- The Oil Sands Working Group with the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) – the latest vision for more harmonization and liberalization of policies for energy integration between Canada and the U.S. – calls for a five-fold increase of tar sands production.

4. Prime Minister Harper has called for a North American climate pact with the U.S., one that acknowledges the important contribution the tar sands make to North American supplies and the need to adopt technologies that would reduce tar sands emissions. Should a North American climate pact allow continued production in the tar sands? Are technological fixes like carbon capture and storage legitimate reasons for ongoing tar sands development?

- The tar sands produce three times as much GHGs as conventional oil production and are the fastest growing source of GHGs in Canada. The tar sands are set to increase from five per cent to 16 per cent of Canada's total emissions by 2020.
- A recent CBC story revealed a government document that says reducing GHGs from the tar sands will be much more difficult than industry and some politicians suggest, "The ministerial briefing notes, initially marked "secret," say that just a small percentage of the carbon dioxide released in mining the sands and producing fuel from them can be captured....Only a small percentage of emitted CO₂ is 'capturable' since most emissions aren't pure enough," the notes say. "Only limited near-term opportunities exist in the oilsands and they largely relate to upgrader facilities."
- Combined, the Canadian and Albertan governments are spending 2.5 billion on carbon capture and storage technology.
- We need real limits on carbon emissions and the Harper government has not demonstrated any commitment to this with their support of intensity-based targets that will actually allow overall GHG emissions to increase

4. What do you think can or should be done about the social, environmental and health impacts of the tar sands?

5. How do you think you or your community can become involved in this issue?