

THE HIGH PRICE OF ENERGY

HOW THE TAR SANDS SUCK OUR ENVIRONMENT DRY

By Sheila Muxlow

Alberta is known as “Wild Rose Country” – a place of sunshine, unique local shopping, great farmers’ markets and incredibly friendly and generous people.

So what made me apprehensive about coming out to Edmonton and taking on my new position as the Prairies regional organizer for the Council of Canadians? Two words: tar sands.

Before coming to Alberta, I had heard of the tar sands through my work with the Council of Canadians on the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP). After listening to Diana Gibson of the Parkland Institute speak, and reading literature from groups like Greenpeace, Sierra Club and Oil Sands Truth, I felt I was informed about Canada’s single largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Terrified, but informed.

I was aware that the extraction process of bitumen is very energy and carbon intensive – worse than conventional oil extraction processes as it pumps more than 27 megatonnes of greenhouse gases annually; that the tar sands cover an area the size of Vancouver Island that used to be a pristine boreal forest with a diverse eco-system; and that extraction from the tar sands takes approximately

five barrels of fresh water for one barrel of bitumen, turning the used water into a toxic sludge that is kept in unregulated tailings ponds, poisoning the nearby Athabasca River and creating concern about its link to rising cancer rates in downstream communities.

I also felt that I understood the impact of the proposed pipelines running north to south from Canada to the United States, and the fact that the tar sands were churning ahead at an unsustainable rate to meet the soaring energy demands of the U.S. Within the agenda of the SPP, corporate and political interests plan to facilitate a fivefold expansion of the Alberta tar sands, increasing the bitumen production to five million barrels a day regardless of the social and environmental consequences.

From an outsider’s perspective, it seems that Albertans are in support of the unfettered growth in their northern region. The leaders of the province come across like free-wheeling cowboys who have no qualms about promoting the tar sands as a necessary industry for the survival of the Albertan and Canadian economies. The last provincial election in Alberta may lead people to assume that the majority of Albertans agree with the narrow views of Progressive Conservative Premier Ed Stelmach.

To my surprise, however, I have found many other organizations and citizens are actually opposed to the tar sands development and want to see the industry stopped, or at least slowed down. Recent coalition work shows that opposition to the tar sands is growing, and that there is a different perspective on the ground.

Less than two months after I arrived, I travelled to the community of Fort McMurray, Alberta, in the heart of the tar sands, with a group of activists from British Columbia. Together, we went wide-eyed into the place of dark air, cancerous water and toxic tailing ponds to learn more about the tar sands and their effect on the people who live closest to them. We held meetings with First Nations elders from both the Fort McKay and the Fort Chipewyan communities, with representatives of the government and industry-sponsored Oil Sands Discovery Centre, and with groups concerned with social justice. We also tried to set up a tour of the Suncor industrial site, but the evening before we were scheduled to attend, Suncor representatives called and cancelled because of “maintenance issues.”

Our meetings were insightful and sad. Yes, there is money coming in to the province from the tar sands, but when you consider the number of imported workers, it is clear that the intent is not to have it remain there for very long. People are working to get out, and some – including our pro-oil tour guide at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre – seem to be disconnected from the future they are sacrificing for their current high wages and disposable incomes. For those concerned with the pace of growth, the lack of planning in the tar sands development is constantly apparent.

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In Fort McKay and Fort Chipewyan, residents are dying of rare cancers at alarming rates. The communities are located north of Fort McMurray and the major operations of Suncor and Syncrude. One woman we met was in her early thirties. She has a 10-year-old daughter, and told us how her husband had just been diagnosed with cancer. The cancer rates in her area are at epidemic levels. Just this past March, this community of only 1,200 people lost six people to cancer. One of them was a young man who was only 27 years old.

In Fort McMurray problems of homelessness and drugs result from a lack of infrastructure and social services. The locals we met were proud of their town and some boasted about the increase they have seen in their home equity. But they are also quick to comment on how the pace of development has been too fast, leaving people without access to many social services like health care and education.

And then there is the air. Although the tar sands operations are not visible from town, you can't deny the lingering smell of the industry and pollution in the air. It coats everything – your nose, your throat and your clothes – and stays with you, pungently and persistently.

A 20-minute drive past Fort McMurray shows you the reality of a boreal forest turned to dead sands and fiery

machines. The universal observation from our group was “Wow, this is like some other world.”

Northern Canada is being turned into a resource bank from which everyone is withdrawing and no one is thinking about sustaining. The region has been opened up to a free market, and the environmental and social sacrifices are the necessary costs for the instantaneous results a booming economy brings.

But the resistance is growing. Social justice and environmental groups are bridging gaps and joining forces. The Council of Canadians has joined with 70 other organizations – both provincial and national – including Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the Alberta Federation of Labour and the United Nurses of Alberta – in calling for “No New Approvals” of tar sands development. This coalition is making the tar sands a nation-wide conversation, and generating momentum outside of Alberta to support the work of many activists on the ground.

This fall will be a perfect opportunity for Council of Canadians activists and members from outside Alberta to learn more about the tar sands and about actions we can all undertake to confront the devastating and destructive pace of tar sands development. The Council of Canadians' Annual General Meeting will be held in Edmonton from October 31 to November 2 and will involve a host of speakers and workshops from renowned experts and allied groups on a large number of issues affecting Canada's current energy boom. Together, we will pose the question “Boom for whom?” and look at who is really benefiting from the rapid pace of tar sands development – and at what price.



Carleen Pickard

Carbon emissions fill the air from tar sands production.



Carleen Pickard

A large piece of machinery that was used as part of the tar sands extraction process looms into the skyline.



Carleen Pickard

Shannon Daub checks out an old piece of equipment used in the tar sands as part of a fact-finding mission in March by several BC activists.

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