

COMMENT

# From North America: Tar Sands - The world's filthiest fuel

Sunday 24 February 2013, by [WARE Michael](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2013).

**Activists in two countries are working together to send the message that immediate action is needed to address climate change, reports Michael Ware.**

ACTIVISTS IN Ontario, Quebec and New England are organizing a week of action in late January to protest the expansion of a pipeline to pump the world's dirtiest fossil fuel across North America [1].

Pipeline companies Enbridge and TransCanada are building a North American network to pump oil drawn from Canada's tar sands in Alberta to ports in the Pacific, Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico [2], cheered on by an international pool of oil companies [3] invested in mowing down boreal forests, strip-mining and drilling on a quarter of Alberta's land mass in order to keep the fossil-fuel party going.

As part of the week of action, 350 New England [4] and Tar Sands Free New England [5] have issued a call for all forces to converge on Portland [6], Maine, on January 26 to demand a halt to pipeline approval. Anyone who can should mobilize as many climate allies for both the regional protest as well as local actions like pickets at ExxonMobil stations or fossil-fuel flash mobs.

The national organization 350.org has also called for a national demonstration against climate change [7] in Washington, D.C., on Presidents Day, February 17.

These actions are especially timely considering that the past year marks a new era of environmental extremes for North America [8]. 2012 was the hottest year ever in the continental U.S., topping the record set in 1998 by a full degree. Arctic sea ice is at its lowest levels since measurements began, disappearing at an alarming clip.

Superstorm Sandy pummeled the East Coast in late October, while drought and extreme heat scarred the South and Midwest. Crops failed, wildfires spread. Some are calling 2012 the "new normal," as four out of the five hottest years have occurred since 1990 [9]. Clearly the climate is changing for the worse, and at a faster rate than anticipated.

Many fear we have reached a tipping point for the climate, or are very close. As 350.org founder Bill McKibben pointed out in a widely read Rolling Stone article called "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," [10] if we want to stay below 2 degrees Centigrade of global warming and avoid catastrophe for life on earth, we can only burn 565 more gigatons of carbon. And yet, fossil fuel companies hold five times that amount in reserve and plan on selling every last dribble of it.

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THE ALBERTA tar sands represent the latest and most lethal portion of those reserves. Their full

exploitation will certainly roast the planet, as James Hansen and others have observed [\[11\]](#).

The process of strip-mining two tons of tar sand from what was a boreal forest and superheating it with water produces a barrel of bitumen, a gritty, low-grade oil substitute that must be mixed with other chemicals to make it flow. In total, it emits three times as many greenhouse gases as conventional oil. Investment in the Tar Sands is estimated at \$200 billion (Canadian) and is considered the world's largest energy project, construction project and capital project, all rolled into one.

Any sane person would ask why we are not putting these resources to better use. Any oil corporation executive would ask how to increase production.

At a moment when all the world knows that we must reverse course, curtail the burning of carbon for fuel, and build a diversified energy infrastructure based on solar, wind, tidal and geothermal energy, the oil companies and the politicians who do their bidding are putting the pedal to the metal.

Instead of a moratorium on any fossil-fuel development, these corporations are expanding it, encouraged by the perverse logic of capitalism: the higher the price of oil, the more potential to extract for a profit the dirtiest, most expensive and toxic hydrocarbons from the most extreme locations.

The growing scarcity of sweet light crude oil easily drilled from vast fields in Saudi Arabia—and the price of crude oil hovering around \$100 per barrel—means that unorthodox methods like cooking tar-heavy sands into synthetic oil, previously too resource-intensive to even consider, are now viable. Along with these more extreme forms of carbon come the greater likelihood of disasters, like the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico or the 2010 bursting of the Enbridge pipeline in Michigan that spilled 877,000 gallons of tar sands oil into the Kalamazoo River [\[12\]](#).

For years, the Canadian government has strongly supported the oil industry and is now the world's sixth largest oil producer. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper is a tar sands stalwart and has recently tried to steamroll any opposition to pipeline construction. Enbridge has made rapid progress in recent weeks [\[13\]](#), hoping to win approval for a west-east-flowing pipeline running from southern Ontario to Montreal, then down through Vermont and New Hampshire to Portland, Maine.

The oil companies are eager to get the tar sands oil to port in order to sell on world markets, where they can get \$20 to \$30 more per barrel from buyers in China and India. Enbridge learned from TransCanada's woes as TransCanada sought to build the Keystone XL pipeline across the Midwest to Texas and met serious opposition from environmental activists. So Enbridge has decided to break up its projects into smaller phases with the goal of eventually linking them into a vast network that could deliver more than a million barrels per day.

Regardless, environmental activists, many of them from First Nation groups, have strongly resisted Tar Sands pipeline projects, like Enbridge's Northern Gateway in British Columbia [\[14\]](#). Enbridge, which has an abysmal safety record [\[15\]](#), wanted the pipeline to cross over 800 rivers and the territories of 40 First Nation groups on its journey to the Pacific.

More than 100 First Nation groups have signed the Save the Fraser Declaration that opposes all pipelines that cross indigenous territories. Large protests mounted by Defend Our Coast this past October and continued resistance by the Idle No More movement have led some to declare the Northern Gateway near dead.

As Saik'uz First Nation Chief Jackie Thomas declared, "I have news for you Mr. Harper: you're never going to achieve your dream of pushing pipelines through our rivers and lands. We will be the wall

that Enbridge cannot break through.”

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IN AUGUST 2011, 350.org led a series of civil disobedience actions against the Keystone XL pipeline at the White House gates, followed by a 12,000-strong encirclement of the White House later in November, forcing the Obama administration to temporarily halt the pipeline’s construction.

TransCanada, which operates the pipeline, started by working on the southern section and building up from Texas, where they expected little opposition. They were wrong. Activists from Tar Sands Blockade have stood in front of bulldozers and chained themselves to machinery in order to impede construction [16]. While their actions may not have stopped construction yet, they have drawn unwanted attention to the tar sands and inspired many to take up this fight against the worst and most politically vulnerable wing of the fossil-fuel industry.

Many activists hold out hope that Obama’s second term will free him from re-election concerns and allow him to champion progressive causes and fight climate change. But Obama’s environmental track record is so sorry that it’s hard to take this hope seriously.

Soon after temporarily halting the permitting process for the XL Pipeline, Obama reaffirmed his commitment to fossil fuels in a March 2012 campaign speech in Cushing, Okla., a gas-and-oil pipeline hub where the middle and lower legs of the XL Pipeline will join [17]:

*"[T]he problem in a place like Cushing is that we're actually producing so much oil and gas in places like North Dakota and Colorado that we don't have enough pipeline capacity to transport all of it to where it needs to go—both to refineries, and then, eventually, all across the country and around the world. There's a bottleneck right here because we can't get enough of the oil to our refineries fast enough...*

Now, right now, a company called TransCanada has applied to build a new pipeline to speed more oil from Cushing to state-of-the-art refineries down on the Gulf Coast. And today, I’m directing my administration to cut through the red tape, break through the bureaucratic hurdles, and make this project a priority, to go ahead and get it done."

Word on the street in Washington is that Obama’s first-term Environmental Protection Agency head Lisa Jackson is resigning in part due to insider knowledge that the administration will soon declare its full support for the XL Pipeline [18].

While this is still speculation, no one should be surprised if Obama takes the wrong side. For American and Canadian politicians, ensuring energy security and the lowest possible energy costs for the corporate executives they serve are top priorities. Stopping global warming is simply an empty campaign promise.

But if indigenous, climate and labor activists make it too politically and economically painful, politicians can be compelled to do the right thing. Morality will play no part in their conversion—other than as a superficial explanation for their change of heart. Pressure is the only thing they respond to besides cash and favors.

At a November convergence of 350 New England in Boston, activist David Stember asked participants, “What would winning look like?” It is a question we should all ask each other because it clarifies our demands and points the way forward.

We should demand that politicians on both sides of the border reject all permitting for the pipelines

and respect indigenous sovereignty, including the right to forbid the construction of any pipelines on their territories. And we should demand the heavy taxation of the fossil-fuel industry to finance the transition to a renewable energy economy.

To do this, we will need the continued growth of the climate justice movement, but we will also need a reinvigorated and forward-thinking labor movement that sees the movements for climate justice and indigenous rights as natural allies. We need international solidarity and support for any group or individual that refuses to strip-mine the forests for tar, load oil tankers, build pipelines, or drive trains and trucks that carry the seeds of their own destruction.

**Michael Ware**, January 23, 2013

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/23/the-worlds-filthiest-fuel>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://vtiso.blogspot.fr/2013/01/no-tar-sands-oil-support-first-nation.html>

[2] [http://insideclimatenews.org/sites/default/files/tarsandspipelineboomapril2012InsideClimateNews\\_0.jpg](http://insideclimatenews.org/sites/default/files/tarsandspipelineboomapril2012InsideClimateNews_0.jpg)

[3] <http://ran.org/list-tar-sands-companies>

[4] <http://350newengland.org/>

[5] <http://www.tarsandsfreene.org/>

[6] <http://350newengland.org/2013/01/tar-sands-free-northeast-actions/>

[7] <http://act.350.org/signup/presidentsday>

[8] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/16/blowing-hot-air-about-global-warming>

[9] <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/08/us/extreme-weather/index.html>

[10] <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

[11] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/game-over-for-the-climate.html>

[12] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enbridge\\_oil\\_spill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enbridge_oil_spill)

[13] See on ESSF (article 27401), [Pipeline politics — Can popular protest stop the tar sands leviathan?](#).

- [14] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/10/23/1074931/from-north-to-south-activists-fight-tar-sands-pipelines/?mobile=nc>
- [15] <http://thetyee.ca/News/2010/07/31/EnbridgeDirtyDozen/>
- [16] <http://socialistworker.org/2012/10/03/a-pipeline-that-threatens-us-all>
- [17] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/03/22/450397/obama-worst-speech-ever-weve-added-enough-new-oil-and-gas-pipeline-to-encircle-the-earth/>
- [18] <http://rt.com/usa/jackson-keystone-obama-pipeline-235/>