

***Speaking Notes Dick Peters/KAIROS NCWC AGM
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Oil and Water: The True Cost of Tar

Sands

KAIROS " Waterworks" Resource

The wealthy, and some not so wealthy, countries have an almost unquenchable thirst for oil: and Canada is rushing to meet the demand through the Alberta's major oil producing projects----the tar sands.

These projects are creating good jobs, huge profits for corporations and healthy government treasuries--and we're told North America's supply is more secure.

If these are the benefits, what are the costs? The impacts of this massive development is being felt beyond Alberta and the costs include climate change , watershed damage, and concerns about human rights, and the absence of public consultation.

Without water, the tar sands wouldn't be worth much. The tar sands projects have an enormous impact on water quality, threatening watershed destruction, over extraction, and contamination.

About Watershed Destruction:

The thick black muck that is tar sands lies beneath a layer of boreal forest and bog. This "overburden" --trees, plants,soil, and waterways--must be stripped away from the top of the underlying deposits. Hundreds of square kilometers of forest and streams are vanishing.

The industry claims that total restoration of the original forest

is possible
but it's difficult to see how a complex ecosystem , adapted to
harsh, cold
growing conditions, can be replaced.

David Schindler, Professor of Ecology at the U of A
compares the reclaimed land to "a golf course where the
lawn mower is broken ----
a hard land with a little pond at the bottom" According to
Schindler
only about 2% of the wetland area have been reclaimed.

What about Over-Extraction?

Enormous amounts of water are needed to separate oil from
sand.

In 2004, 3 of the major corporations were allocated 138
billion liters of water for the year. Once the projects are fully
developed, they will use 175 million liters a day in an energy
intensive process that until recently was not considered
economical.

One of the reasons extraction is so viable is the free access
which the government provides to the Athabasca River.
Running north through a very fragile ecosystem, it's the only
major river that has no dams, and until now no extensive
water extraction.

Steam and water are forced through the sands that have
been mined, or are injected into the sands that lie beneath
the forest. It takes approx 5 gallons of water to extract each
gallon of oil; Water from this primary process is reused
where possible, bringing the ratio to approx 2 gallons of
water for every gallon of oil.

What about the Contamination?

By the time the water is ready for disposal, it's filled with silt and contaminated with a wide range of chemicals that can't be returned to the environment. It must be removed from the watershed and stored in enormous ponds, some of which are larger than the natural lakes in the area----

If you know what used oil looks like, just imagine what these vast stretches of contaminated, dead water must be like ---It's an incredibly devastating experience to actually see these things -----

Whose Land ? Whose Health?

The damage to the land and water is carried out by the oil and gas corporations, aided by the poor long range planning by government. Scrutiny is limited because the oil sands are relatively remote, and lie under Aboriginal treaty land in a fairly thin populated area.

Aboriginal communities are struggling to make themselves heard.

Last year CBC carried stories focusing on the community of Fort Chipewyan on the shores of Lake Athabasca.

The doctor in that community wonders if the large cluster of rare cancers and other diseases occurring among the population there are related to water contamination from tar sands-----after this public exposure by the CBC, the Alberta government agreed to hold a review.

Whose Responsibility?

The tar sands can't move ahead without federal oversight and approval, including legally required environmental impact assessments. Many of these have not been carried out ---last year The Federal Court of Appeal allowed Petro - Canada to bypass a comprehensive environmental assessment of it's Fort Hills Oil Sands Project.

Governments are approving expansion so rapidly that the Town of Fort Mc Murray has requested that the pace of development be slowed----in order to allow for more sustainable development of the tar sands and the infrastructure needed for the workers.

Groups from First Nations and the Province of Alberta are also resisting the pace of development and raising public awareness about the cost to the environment. They remind us that future generations rely on this land, and that Canada's promise to the international community is being broken largely due to tar sands operations.

We live in an economy and consumer society that relies on oil, and that makes it hard for all of us to acknowledge it's true price.

(Last week , The Pembina Institute in Alberta released the findings of a independent poll taken recently on tar sands operation & development.)

