

BOB DOPPELT: Oil from tar sands one of the world's dirtiest fuels

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Peak oil has never concerned me. Not because it's untrue. The production of conventional oil probably has peaked or soon will. It's because other fossil fuels can be converted into oil. Even if conventional oil peaks, oil derived from other fossil fuels can flow for decades. The longer we burn petroleum, however, the more carbon emissions we generate.

Our greatest problem is not running out of oil. It's that it won't happen quickly enough to prevent uncontrollable climate change.

Keeping oil — and profits — flowing is exactly what the Keystone XL pipeline proposal is all about. In 2008, TransCanada, a Canadian oil company, proposed to build a \$7 billion pipeline that would bring 700,000 barrels a day of crude oil made from tar sands — a fossil fuel — 2,000 miles from Alberta, Canada, to Texas. Environmentalists thought they had killed the project this fall when the Obama administration delayed until 2013 a decision on whether to approve it.

But Congress' extension of the payroll tax cut includes a provision that requires the president to make a decision about the Keystone XL pipeline within two months. The pipeline is far from dead.

Why should we be concerned? Making liquid fuels from tar sands requires a tremendous amount of energy for steam injection and refining. These processes, combined with the emissions generated when the oil is used, emit 10 percent to 45 percent more climate-damaging greenhouse gases into the atmosphere compared to conventional oil.

Opponents of Keystone XL, including noted climate scientist Dr. James Hansen of NASA's Godard Institute of Space Studies, say the pipeline will double our nation's reliance on one of the world's dirtiest fuels and result in carbon dioxide emissions equal to adding 6 million more cars to our highways. That's a scary proposition at a time when carbon emissions must be dramatically cut to prevent runaway climate change.

One of the first people to raise the alarm about the risks of Canadian tar sands oil was Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy. In 2008, she organized the High Carbon Fuels Resolution, which was unanimously endorsed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. The goal was to send a message to Canadians, the U.S. Congress, and the president that the mayors of America are concerned about dirty fuels.

But that wasn't enough to stop the use of tar sands oil. It turns out that behind the scenes some of the world's richest oil companies and the Canadian government have been working overtime to shore up support from the Obama administration for tar sands oil, while also undermining U.S. climate protection efforts.

The strategy, reported by Salon magazine and the Tyee, an independent Canadian online news site, is revealed in 300-plus pages of e-mails obtained through a Freedom of Information request to the Alberta government. The e-mails show that Michael Whatley, an oil industry lobbyist with deep ties to the Republican party, and his friend Gary Mar, a diplomat at the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C., operated a sophisticated and largely secret campaign aimed at manipulating our political system.

Through a fake organization set up to appear like a grass-roots group, they relentlessly pounded the media as well as state and federal officials with messages supporting the Canadian tar sands industry. They also used these and other strategies to defeat U.S. efforts to protect the climate by reducing oil consumption.

To keep us hooked on tar sands oil and reap billions in profit, they put our lives and the well-being of our children at risk.

So far they have succeeded. Climate protection efforts have stalled in most states. Tar sands oil has already entered the U.S. market, and if big oil and the Canadian government get their way, we will use much more in the future. The Canadian National Energy Board recently said it expects production to more than triple in the coming years, with the United States as well as Asia targeted for massive exports.

Carbon dioxide is the primary driver of climate change. Because oil is one of the primary sources of carbon dioxide, its use must be rapidly slashed. We can't wait for peak oil to accomplish this. The Obama administration must say no to the Keystone Pipeline, and all levels of government must prohibit the use of tar sands oil. Just as importantly, we must wake up to the grave threat to our democracy and to our children's future posed by the stealth campaign operated by big oil, the Canadian government and others to make it appear that the U.S. public opposes climate protection. We now know that the dissent has largely been fabricated.

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