

The source of the oil matters

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After the health risks of smoking became clear, government took steps to protect the public. Government action will likewise be needed to protect the public — and the planet — from unconventional fossil fuels.

The world supply of conventional oil is shrinking, and petroleum companies are ramping up the production of oil from “unconventional” sources such as tar sands, coal and oil shale.

Unfortunately, oil from these sources causes even more environmental damage than conventional oil. If global warming is to be resolved, the use of unconventional oil must be constrained.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors recently decided to do just that. Through an effort led by Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, in June the mayors unanimously passed a resolution challenging the use of unconventional high-carbon fuels. Oil made in Canada from tar sands was the primary target because, so far, it is the only unconventional fuel in commercial production. The High Carbon Fuels Resolution sends a message to Canada — and the U.S. Congress — that mayors in America want better environmental controls over the fuels they purchase.

The resolution does not ban tar sand oil. Instead, it encourages U.S. cities to get better information on the life-cycle of the greenhouse gas emissions of the fuels they use. It also calls for better tracking of where high carbon fuels are extracted, refined and sold.

Making tar sands oil releases up to three times more greenhouse gases than the production of conventional oil, which itself is highly polluting. To access the tar sands, forests and wetlands must be bulldozed, scarring thousands of acres of hard-to-restore landscapes. The waste from mining tar sand is dumped into reservoirs — called tailing ponds — that now cover almost 20 square miles in Canada. Last spring an estimated 500 ducks died after landing in a toxic wastewater pond, showing that tar sands operations harm birds and wildlife.

The petroleum industry also is looking for ways to introduce liquid coal and oil

shale to the market. Coal is the world's single largest source of carbon dioxide. Top scientists such as James Hansen, head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, are calling for a moratorium on coal. Making oil from coal would make it much tougher to resolve global warming.

Similar problems exist with shale oil. Producing it also would devastate large segments of the Rocky Mountain region and require vast amounts of energy and water.

"As I work here at home to reduce our carbon emissions and become less dependent on fossil fuels I have learned more about how we need to think about the best options to pursue," Mayor Piercy told me. "I've learned we need to be more transparent in how we make decisions about what we purchase."

Asking about the full life-cycle effects of fuels is important. Since 2005 the city of Eugene has reduced its emissions by almost 5 percent. But the city's efforts will be undermined if, unknowingly, it uses unconventional fuels that spew heaps of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and ravage the environment.

Some Canadians reacted angrily, saying Piercy should mind her own business. These reactions have not deterred the mayor. After all, the unanimous support for the resolution shows that many mayors agree with her. She also got a number of thank-you notes from Canadians.

I worked with Piercy on her Sustainable Business Initiative and became an admirer. The mayor deserves credit for taking a stand.

"It's been my experience that national policies affect local communities," she said. "I am also a strong believer that local governments can affect national policy. This resolution will go to Congress, which is what we intended. In addition, each of the mayors is now better educated about this issue."

Just as government action is needed to protect the public from tobacco, so too is government action essential to protect the climate on which all organisms depend.

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