

ALBERTA'S TAR SANDS AND IDAHO'S WILDERNESS GATEWAY

By Nick Gier

In April of 2008, over 1,000 ducks flying over Northern Alberta took a break from their migration north and landed in what they perceived was just another lake in the area. They never took flight again, along with other 10,000 other waterfowl that year. The water in many of these lakes has been tarred and poisoned by bitumen processing.

Extracting hydrocarbons from crude oil and coal has always been a dirty business, but tar sands processing releases three to four times the greenhouse gases that conventional drilling does. Alberta's tar sands, whose 175 billion barrel reserve is second only to Saudi Arabia, requires 220 gallons of fresh water to produce one barrel of oil. The slurry is cooked using natural gas, consuming in one day what it takes to heat 3 million homes.

The waste water from the plants have polluted the land and the once pure Athabasca River. Cancer rates are rising among the native populations there, and their moose meat is now laced with dangerous levels of arsenic. The environment group One Blue Marble reports that processing the bitumen releases benzene, "one of the most lethal human carcinogens, into the atmosphere at a rate of 100 tons per year; it could be as high as 800 tons per year by 2015."

Canada's Imperial Oil and Exxon-Mobil are now requesting permits from Idaho and Montana to move 200 loads of equipment to Alberta's Kearle Oil Project. These loads are truly oversized: 210 feet long, 30 feet tall, 24 feet wide, and 300 tons. They require tractors on the front and the back.

We can well understand why the people of Vancouver, BC and every town between there and Fort McMurray, Alberta do not want this super heavy traffic on their roads, but why should the people of Idaho and Montana agree to this? A quick look at the map demonstrates why the oil companies have chosen the southern route: the Port of Lewiston 400 miles inland, a virtually unobstructed Highway 12 to Missoula, and Interstates 90 and 15 to the Canadian border.

About 70 miles of Idaho Highway 12 runs along the Lochsa River, which has the "wild and scenic" designation. This pristine area offers superior camping, fishing, and rafting opportunities. At mile marker 124 there is a campground named "Wilderness Gateway." From there backpackers and mule trains enter the Selway-Bitterroot, the largest wilderness area outside of Alaska.

The Idaho permits require no public input, and the Department of Transportation is treating this as it would any other oversized load. All that its engineers have to do is to make sure that the loads have sufficient number of wheels so that the road and bridges are not destroyed by the tremendous weight.

The oil companies have assured the two states that the equipment contains no hazardous materials, and that it will be moved at night in 50 mile segments. The companies have also contributed \$22-26 million dollars to road upgrades. In addition Idaho will receive \$1,000 per load for a total of \$200,000 in fees.

The state of Montana does allow citizen input, and on April 29 hundreds of people showed up at a public hearing in Missoula. Those who testified now have legal standing to file suit in federal court to stop the shipments.

In March federal judge Donald Malloy ruled that drilling on 38,000 acres in Eastern Montana must be suspended until the impact of green gas emissions has been considered. (Equally massive equipment for this project has now arrived in Lewiston and was scheduled to take the same route as the Imperial Oil loads.) Short of a suit, Montana activists are hoping that they can persuade the government to conduct a federal environmental impact statement.

Today oil extraction in Northern Alberta is the largest “single point” source of green house gases in Canada, and experts predict that “by 2015, the oil sands are expected to emit more greenhouse gases than the nation of Denmark (pop. 5.4 million), and by 2020 the oil sands will release twice the amount produced currently by all the cars and trucks in Canada.”

Observing that “one doesn’t build a railroad and run only one train on it,” Missoula attorney Robert Gentry believes that this is only the beginning of regular transshipment of oil equipment from Lewiston to Fort McMurray. He says that the Port of Lewiston is expanding to accommodate this new business.

The processed crude from these fields, doubling to 2.2 million barrels a day by 2015, is pumped directly into pipelines to be refined in the U.S. It is predicted that 40 percent of America’s oil supplies will eventually come from what has been called the most destructive extraction industry in human history.

On the fourth day of the shipments from Lewiston, Imperial Oil’s huge loads will sit all day long at Wilderness Gateway. I can think of nothing more offensive to me as an Idahoan, who, like tens of thousands of others, loves this state’s natural beauty.

These steel behemoths will symbolize everything that is bad about extracting oil from and destroying Canadian wilderness and remind us of everything that is good about Idaho’s pristine land and waters.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. During that time he has also fished and rafted Idaho’s rivers and hiked its wilderness trails.