Tar Sands – Is the Noose Tightening?

There has certainly been a tremendous amount of activity surrounding the Keystone XL pipeline project – as there should be: It's a big test for the environmental movement and, frankly, for the Obama Administration. If approved and built, the KXL will give a tremendous boost to the economic prospects for Canadian tar sands. If denied, the permit will, at the same time, be a serious body blow to the further development of the tar sands and, perhaps more importantly, provide a hugely important signal from Barack Obama that he is deadly serious about solving the climate crisis. Beating back KXL will also be a historic victory for us treehuggers.

But the Canadian tar sands developers are working on several other fronts to get their product to market. The Northern Gateway would carry the oil from Alberta west through British Columbia and First Nations lands to ports on the Pacific. Many of the First Nations are a critical voice in the heart of the phalanx of opposition to the Northern Gateway.

The pipeline took a very big hit last week when the government of BC formally announced its opposition. BC had five conditions for its approval. They were not met. One of the biggest concerns, as the BC environment minister, Terry Lake, noted is spill response. "Northern Gateway has said that they would provide effective spill response in all cases. However, they have presented little evidence as to how they will respond." The federal government has the final say on the pipeline but as Lake is quoted in Businessweek: "The federal government really isn't interested in forcing something down the throat of a province that has legitimate objections to it." We'll see. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has extensive coverage on this project, including on the politics of the pipeline. Pipe Up Against Enbridge has plenty of information as well on the many good arguments against the pipeline and the tar sands, as does the excellent and effective ForestEthics.

InsideClimate News carried an important and sobering story yesterday: other vigorous efforts are well underway to expand existing pipelines and create new ones to transport this noxious product. Much of this activity centers around increasing the capacity of Line 67, from Alberta to Wisconsin. That will require the same State Department permit as the KXL does. Stay tuned because the action is going to get a lot more focused on this route.

Americans and Canadians alike oppose the pipeline and tar sands development. About 1.2 million public comments came in on KXL to State. (One was mine. This article for DeSmogBlog served as my statement.) I also noted here the opposition in Canada, one compelling bit of evidence of which was this eloquent op-ed in the NY Times from the distinguished political scientist, Thomas Homer-Dixon. Another strong voice from our northern neighbor is that of historian François Furstenberg in reaction to one of Joe Nocera's sadly demented rants in favor of KXL.

Meanwhile, our brothers and sisters in Europe have for a number of years been developing their Fuel Quality Directive. The FQD serves to reduce the greenhouse gas intensity of transportation fuels. Tar sands oil would fail the proposed critical "well-to-wheel" standard for GHG intensity. Friends of the Earth Europe had an excellent report a few months ago on how the Canadians in the federal government and from Alberta have been assiduously lobbying key EU commissioners, MEPs and staff to allow their oil to come to market in Europe. The lobbying has apparently sometimes drifted into what some might call intimidation.

To make a long story short, if Europe stands tall, and John Kerry and Barack Obama do the right thing on climate protection, as they so vehemently insist is their will, and the good citizens of British Columbia and the First Nations in Western Canada continue their principled opposition to the manifest environmental and public health threats posed by a massive diluted bitumen pipeline, then how are you going to get your crud – sorry, I guess I mean *crude* – to market? Hmmm.