Northern Alberta’s tar sands are home to 175 billion barrels of recoverable bitumen, a tar-like substance that requires intensive processing to become liquid fuel. Approximately 1.4 million barrels of bitumen are produced daily with plans to increase to 2.2 million barrels by 2015. But the impacts of this massive project stretch much further than just Alberta. Here is a cross-Canada look at how tar sands development is affecting our country:

The west coast and Northwest Territories

Plans are already underway to ship tar sands crude and refined products through B.C. to U.S. and Asia-Pacific markets. This involves significant expansions to existing pipelines (like Kinder Morgan’s Trans-Mountain Pipeline Expansion) and building of new infrastructure (such as Enbridge’s Gateway Project.) Pipeline leaks and spills risk contaminating local ecosystems and more refineries mean more toxic emissions. The Dogwood Initiative outlines five reasons to stop the use of Northern B.C. coastal waters as a hub for shipping tar sands. This includes the impacts of the inevitable spills on a unique ecosystem that is home to a number of endangered species as well as thriving tourist and fishing industries. Enbridge’s Gateway Project will violate a moratorium in place to protect the Douglas Channel. Alberta is running low on natural gas, a relatively clean burning source of energy used to heat many Canadian homes that also helps fuel tar sands production. In addition to transporting gas from B.C., plans are being proposed, and some are underway, to bring natural gas to the tar sands from Alaska through B.C. as well as from the Northwest Territories via the Mackenzie Gas Project. These projects are dominated by, and will profit, corporate oil and gas giants and propose tapping into natural gas supplies in sensitive eco-systems. Groups like the Arctic Indigenous Youth Network and impacted aboriginal peoples such as the Dehcho First Nation have been voicing their environmental, social, economic and treaty rights objections to the Mackenzie Gas project.

Prairies

People living in Alberta and Saskatchewan are directly impacted by the pollution and contamination of their land, water and air, and the social consequences of unbridled development of Alberta’s tar sands. First Nations and Métis communities are not receiving adequate support, compensation or having a say in tar sands development and pipeline construction within or near their traditional territories. Downstream from the tar sands, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation is experiencing unusually high cancer rates, and the water they rely on from Lake Athabasca has high levels of carcinogens. Air quality in Fort McMurray and the tar sands region is deteriorating as massive amounts of pollution fill the air. Social services and infrastructure are lagging far behind the community needs, and health and environmental concerns with tar sands upgraders persist. The tar sands are responsible for both the depletion and contamination of water in Alberta and have long-standing impacts on people and the environment. The threat of deportation keeps the many temporary foreign workers in the tar sands in an unstable situation. Saskatchewan is experiencing acid rain as a direct result of the tar sands, which is bad for human and ecosystem health. There are also proposals moving forward for tar sands development in Saskatchewan.

Ontario and Quebec

In helping to increase the value of the Canadian dollar, the destructive pace of tar sands development has had serious impacts on the manufacturing sector and jobs in the pulp and paper industry. This impact has been particularly harsh in Ontario and Quebec with job losses causing hardships on families. According to Statistics Canada, between 2004 and 2008, Canada lost 322,000 manufacturing jobs. A report by a University of Ottawa professor of economy attributes half of this employment loss to our “petro dollar,” which made exports in these sectors less appealing, and the “Dutch Disease Phenomenon.” Dutch Disease occurs when countries depend too heavily on a resource boom without saving associated revenues and policies to help diversify the economy. The possibility of expanding the transportation of crude oil to Ontario and Quebec is raising alarm bells. A report by the University of
Toronto, How the Oil Sands got the Great Lakes, outlines the serious risks associated with expanded refineries in the Great Lakes area to process tar sand’s bitumen. This includes concerns with severe water depletion and contamination, and a significant increase in greenhouse gas emissions. A refinery near Sarnia, Ontario that processes tar sands products is contributing to pollution that is negatively impacting surrounding communities including the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. There has been strong opposition in Quebec to Enbridge’s proposed plan to reverse the flow of a pipeline from Sarnia to Montreal. This will give Quebec refineries access to tar sands products, it will also facilitate shipment to U.S. markets. Climate justice activists are working with community members along the pipeline route to oppose progress. While Enbridge has officially shelved the much-criticized project, a U.S. based company is still trying to move forward plans for a pumping station near Durham, Quebec, which will help revive the pipeline project.

Atlantic region

Worker migration from Atlantic Canada is not new. Faced with the collapse of local industries such as fisheries and coal mining, this region has a history of workers leaving their family and friends to seek employment in the current economic “boom” region of the country. The tar sands are the world’s largest energy project, attracting the migration of workers from Atlantic Canada. In addition to drawing young workers away from local jobs – labour shortages are occurring in some sectors – this pattern causes hardships on families, exposes workers to dangerous jobs (workplace deaths in Alberta are one of the highest in the country), and contributes to low population growth rates in the region. In the end, the long-term impacts of this migration are largely unknown.

In addition to the worker migration issues, Atlantic Canada relies heavily on imported oil to meet the region’s needs. Faced with diminishing reserves globally and Canadian commitments to export oil to the U.S. thanks to free trade agreements like NAFTA and free market rules, Atlantic Canada is in a vulnerable position in terms of oil energy security.

Energy expert Gordon Laxer argues that conventional oil could meet Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada’s needs if matched by greater conservation efforts, bringing consumption of oil in line with production of oil in Canada. Currently close to 70 per cent of Canada’s oil and 61 per cent of our gas is exported to the U.S. The gravity of the climate crisis we face means communities across Canada require plans to transition off of fossil fuel development as rapidly as possible through policies such as increased conservation and energy efficiency, public sustainable transit, and the expansion of public and community-owned renewable energy.

Take action!

The Council of Canadians participates in tar sands events, actions and campaigns at local, national and international levels. Refer to our website for news, updates and ways to join the movement for a tar sands free future. Visit our website at www.canadians.org/tarsands

Resources:

www.canadians.org/energy
www.dogwoodinitiative.org/notankers
www.tarsandsfreebc.org; www.mackenziewild.ca
www.tarsandswatch.org; www.dominionpaper.ca/topic/tar_sands
http://oilsandstruth.org/taxonomy/vocabulary/2
http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2010/08/13/TarSandsEconomicFate/
http://www.ienearth.org/cits.html
http://climateactionmontreal.wordpress.com/materials/

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