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Recent oil spills reinforce Keystone pipeline as a crude option

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Eco Catholic

In the days of the Canadian frontier, indigenous peoples and fur traders used liquid bitumen to seal their canoes.

With the advance of technology, however, the substance has become a lucrative boon for the oil industry. For the rest of us, it has all the makings of an ecological horror story. Bitumen is a viscous, low-grade petroleum. It is the chief ingredient in the dirty oil mix now being exported from the Alberta tar sands to the United States.

Two recent oil-spilling accidents prompt fervent wishes that bitumen had been confined to gluing together the simple canoes of by-gone days.

On March 27, a mile-long Canadian Pacific train filled with Canadian crude derailed 150 miles from Minneapolis, spilling an estimated 15,000 gallons of tar sands crude.

Two days later, Exxon's 60-year-old Pegasus pipeline in Arkansas burst underneath the little town of Mayflower, a suburban neighborhood near Little Rock.

Lakes of noxious-smelling crude oil from an estimated 12,000 gallons have flooded streets and yards. Families had to evacuate from 22 homes, with no timetable from oil company officials for when they can return. Moms are fretting over possible respiratory dangers their kids could suffer by playing outside during school hours.

Ducks and other wildlife have not escaped the devastation. A Russellville humane rescue group, Helping

Arkansas's Wild Kritters, has posted photos of the pitiful, suffering oil-covered birds on its Facebook page. An Arkansas friend of mine reports that no one seems to yet know the full extent of the harm. Her heart aches for the probable suffering ahead for the wildlife around Little Rock.

As President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry prepare to rule on whether or not to okay construction of an expanded Keystone XL pipeline to the Gulf Coast, progressives are urging them to reject it. One group, the League of Conservation Voters, is urging 62,500 people to voice their pipeline objections to the U.S. State Department by April 22; so far, more than 60,000 have already responded.

Meanwhile, environmentalists shake their heads in amazement, wondering how many more oil spills it will take to convince the dirty-energy believers how harmful, carbon-saturated tar sands oil is.

Grist.org, an online environmental news site, sums up the dangers: "It is especially potent stuff. It's heavier than standard crude, which causes it to quickly sink and complicates cleanup efforts. It is cut with cancer-causing chemicals such as benzene to thin it out so it can flow through pipes."

Lest Americans assume that Canadians are wholly in favor of the pipeline, a recent New York Times op-ed piece assures us that they are not. Thomas Homer-Dixon, a professor of global governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Ontario, wrote March 31 that nearly 42 percent are opposed.

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"Many of us, in fact, want to see the tar sands industry wound down and eventually stopped," he wrote, "even though it pumps tens of billions of dollars annually into our economy." Obama could do Canada a great favor by blocking the pipeline, Homer-Dixon adds.

This 42-percent opposition are concerned because "tar sands production is one of the world's most environmentally damaging activities," he continues. "It wrecks vast areas of boreal forest through surface mining and subsurface productions. It sucks up huge quantities of water from local rivers, turns it into toxic waste and dumps the contaminated water into tailing ponds that now cover nearly 70 square miles."

Homer-Dixon paints a troubling picture of his country's Conservative government. Many of its members deny mainstream climate science. "The Conservatives have slashed financing for climate science, closed facilities that do research on climate change, told federal government climate scientists not to speak publicly about their work without approval and tried, unsuccessfully to portray the tar sands industry as environmentally benign."

He adds that the government has given Canada's tax office extra resources to audit registered charities, and guess who the main targets are? Environmental groups opposing the tar sands.

For those who need the backstory on how the tar Sands project grew into the problem it has become, Grist has posted "Keystone komics," a humorous, information-filled cartoon slideshow created by Seattle illustrator Nikki Burch and Baltimore-based freelance writer Jim Meyer.

The tar sands debate bring three quotes to mind. John Upton, another Grist writer, advised Monday:
?When it comes to transporting tar sands oil to Gulf Coast refiners, it seems that the only safe option is to not transport it at all. Leave that [four-letter word] in the ground and plant some wind turbines and solar panels over it.?

May Boeve, a clean energy supporter and executive director of 350.org, said on MSNBC the same day,
?You never hear about a solar spill. When you hear about a solar spill, we call it a beautiful day.?

The final comment comes from a man who died 2,000 years ago on the cross for holding to his beliefs. If Obama and Kerry cave in, Jesus? words will certainly surface once again in many hearts: ?Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.?

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