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A Line in the Tar Sands

The proposed 1179 mile Keystone XL pipeline would transport tar sand oil from Hardisty, Alberta to Steele City, Nebraska. From there, the crude oil, labeled bitumen, would continue on another 780 miles to refineries in the Texas Gulf Coast area. In the near future, President Obama will decide on whether or not the pipeline will be built.

Both the energy providers and the environmental community have drawn lines in the sand. Each believes that this is a battle that they cannot afford to lose. The oil companies point to increased jobs, energy security, low cost for the U.S. with TransCanada footing most of the 7 billion cost, and the idea that the oil will get to market one way or another.

The environmentalists claim that tar sand oil is the dirtiest oil on the planet. According to the State Department's Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, (DSEIS), it takes 81% more energy to extract and process tar sand oil from ground to pump than conventional oil.

Also environmentalists cite the danger of oil spills to aquifers and water wells, and to Canadian native communities downstream of the extraction centers. These communities have suffered the contamination of their potable water - giving rise to increased cancer rates among their people and their wildlife. (See bitumen oil spills in Kalamazoo, Michigan and Mayflower, Arkansas.)

Although these reasons are important, the main reason that environmentalists are fighting Keystone XL is even more critical: the warming of our planet due to carbon dioxide emissions primarily from fossil fuels. As our planet warms, the consequences are more and more acute raging forest fires, floods, storms, tornadoes, droughts, and heat, among them. At present, New York City seeks to spend 20 billion for levees and flood gates to hold back the Atlantic, while Colorado seeks federal aid for the largest forest fire in its history.

Environmentalists calculate that to keep climate change from causing cataclysmic damage to our way of life, we can burn only 20% of our known conventional oil reserves which do not include tar sand or shale oil. <u>If we need to keep 80% of our known conventional reserves of oil in the ground, it makes no sense to open vast new reserves of energy intensive, dirty tar sand oil.</u>

Late this summer or early fall, President Obama will make his final decision on whether or not the Keystone XL pipeline can cross the Canadian border into the U.S. The U.S. State Department (DSEIS) gives a positive report for building the pipeline while the Environmental Protection Agency has replied with criticism of the draft citing "Environmental Objections" and "Insufficient Information" on several important conclusions in the report. Both reports can be found on the internet.

Due to the vast sums of money involved for big oil, lobbyists flood our government urging our senators and congressmen to press the President to support the building of the pipeline. On May 23, 2013, the House of Representatives voted to override the Presidential permitting process and to allow the pipeline to enter the U.S. Thus far, the Senate has not taken up the bill.

Soon, the State Department will issue its final draft of its environmental impact statement taking into account the many responses to its initial draft - from other government agencies, environmental groups, energy companies, and individual citizens. After a 30-day comment period, the State Department will issue its National Interest Determination (NID) on the Keystone XL pipeline. The NID is considered the most influential report that the President will receive prior to his final ruling on the pipeline.

In his ground breaking speech on climate at Georgetown University, President Obama stated, "The net effects of the pipeline's impact on our climate will be absolutely critical to determining whether this project [Keystone XL] is allowed to go forward. It's relevant." Opening the door wider for dirty tar sand oil would have a negative impact on our climate. Make your voice heard; e-mail, write, and phone our President – let him know you want a healthy and safe planet.

A column by Reading Climate Committee members Ron D'Addario and David L. Williams