

Backgrounder on President Obama's February 19th visit to Canada

Obama2Canada is a network of groups that has come together around President Obama's February 19 visit to Canada to advocate for a new energy economy in North America, and to advocate against special treatment for the Alberta tar sands in any U.S.-Canada agreement on energy and global warming. Clearinghouse contacts: In the U.S.: Lisa McCrummen, 206-321-9461. In Canada: Jennifer Foulds, 416-323-9521 xt 232

This network of groups, which has created the website obama2canada.org, advocates against the expansion of the tar sands industry and in favor of its cleanup, because tar sands oil production is highly carbon intensive, highly polluting, uses excessive water, harms indigenous people and destroys the boreal forest and wildlife. It is the dirtiest oil on earth and the Alberta tar sands as a whole is the dirtiest project on earth.

There are three main topics of conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Harper on the 19th: Afghanistan, the economy, and energy/environment. While contours of the first two issues are relatively well known, the third topic is the "sleeper" issue with controversial choices.

Two days after the election of President Obama, Prime Minister Harper began to pitch a North American approach to global warming and energy that connects the two issues. **It has been widely reported that the Harper government will seek some kind of special treatment for the tar sands** in this context, to not deal as aggressively with tar sands emissions as other economic sectors.

While the U.S. is just now starting to design a federal system to cap industrial emissions, Canada has been designing its federal system for some years in the context of having ratified the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. **By ratifying the Kyoto Protocol Canada committed to reduce its greenhouse gas pollution to 6 percent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012.**

However, the Government of Canada has abandoned this international obligation and the Harper government's current plan, if implemented, would result in emissions 2 percent above 1990 by 2020, far less than climate science suggests required for Canada to do its fair share to address global warming.

Canada still does not have any regulations to reduce greenhouse gas pollution and now the Harper government appears to be waiting for the U.S. system rather than moving ahead. **Despite years of talk there has been no action and Canada has become an international laggard in addressing global warming.**

To enable the rapid expansion of oil production in the Alberta tar sands, the Canadian design for an emissions system has so far relied on "intensity" targets for industry that would require modest cuts per unit of production, but which allows overall emissions to rise as production increases. In fact, the Government of Canada acknowledges that under its plan overall emissions from the tar sands will increase by more than two thirds between 2006 and 2020. The Canadian design has also provided loopholes for polluters that don't comply – to pay a penalty into a technology fund, for example.

Under the Canadian division of powers, the provinces are also able to pursue regulation of industrial polluters, and some have done so in absence of federal leadership. Provinces like Ontario, Quebec, BC, and Manitoba have been pursuing "hard caps" instead of intensity targets, while Alberta, which is home to active tar sands development, has implemented the intensity based approach now mimicked by the Canadian federal system.

In other words, Canadians are being held hostage on global warming by the tar sands. A federal system could pre-empt provincial systems, or the Canadian Government could negotiate “equivalency agreements” with the provinces to let them regulate under certain conditions. Equivalency negotiations are ongoing between the governments of Alberta and Canada.

The projected expansion of emissions from the tar sands held up a national hard cap in Canada until the election of President Obama made it clear that the U.S. would itself pursue a hard cap. Given the integration of the U.S. and Canadian economies, it is unlikely that U.S. industries would accept their Canadian competitors working under a weaker system.

Because a hard cap for heavy industry in Canada therefore now seems inevitable, it calls the question of how to handle the intention of the tar sands industry to rapidly increase emissions over the coming years. **This is the reason for the Harper government’s intention to pitch the Obama administration on some kind of special treatment for the tar sands, justified in the name of “energy security.”**

Special treatment for the tar sands, however, is not only undesirable on the grounds that scientists tell us all emissions must rapidly drop, but also on the grounds of equity between economic sectors and regions. **Having the tar sands industry outside a hard cap is unfair to those inside it.** Or, giving the tar sands proportionately more pollution allocation under a hard cap means that others in the cap must do more to compensate if the cap is to hold.

Some try to characterize Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) as a technological “silver bullet” that would allow the tar sands to expand while reducing emissions. A Canadian government memo, however, notes that CCS is technically more suited to large stationary sources of carbon dioxide like coal fired power plants. Long term storage of carbon dioxide remains unproven, and the technology is also very expensive – up to \$200/tonne. Finally, unlike with coal plants, CCS would not deal with the end use of the product where most of the impact takes place – burning the oil in vehicles.

Producing a barrel of tar sands oil leads to at least three times the emissions as producing a barrel of conventional oil. The tar sands are also the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas pollution in Canada.

Because only one-fifth of the tar sands deposit is shallow enough to strip mine, **emissions per barrel will naturally increase over time as production shifts to deeper deposits and non-mining methods** that require more energy in the extraction process.

In addition to climate change impacts, **tar sands production causes widespread landscape destruction and disturbance, the creation of massive toxic tailings lakes that leak into the groundwater, and increasing acid rain. Producing each barrel of tar sands oil by strip mining requires two to four and a half barrels of water,** which is placing unprecedented stress on the aquatic systems and water resources in the province of Alberta and other provinces.

Aboriginal communities in the tar sands region have borne the brunt of local impacts, including the destruction of traditional hunting and fishing areas. They are also deeply concerned about toxic contamination of fish and game, air and water, and possible impacts on their health. Three lawsuits have been filed by Aboriginal communities in tar sands areas to date, with more lawsuits emerging.

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