

Teleconference Call Summary
February 16, 2011
Jeremy Symons and Felice Stadler, National Wildlife Federation

Jeremy Symons, senior vice president for Conservation and Education, and Felice Stadler, director of programs and operations for NWF's Climate and Energy Program, joined RN members to discuss the environmental impact of Alberta tar sands development, and impending approval of a massive pipeline designed to transport the tar sands crude oil to refineries in Texas. Jeremy and Felice recently traveled to Canada to witness firsthand the destruction caused by the tar sands development.

The area of land currently under speculation for development is about the size of Florida. Part of this area is already under development, but the rest is still pristine forest, and serves as habitat for countless species and home to First Nations communities. If the pipeline is approved, oil companies will begin tearing down the remaining forest.

The amount of resources consumed by oil sands production is staggering: 4 tons of sand and 3 barrels of clean water are required to produce one barrel of crude oil. The clean water becomes a toxic sludge, which is held in large man-made lakes. The oil companies work to keep birds away from the operation; if one should land on the toxic lake, it would die almost instantly. The wildlife is not the only population harmed by tar sands. Indigenous communities living near the development have suffered health effects from the fumes produced by the tar sands; on some days, the smell is too strong to venture outside at all. The oil companies have provided some funds to the small indigenous communities and have subsequently intimidated them into remaining quiet about the operation. The locals are left practically helpless to fight the companies.

The U.S. government sees the oil sands as a solution to our dependence on oil from the Middle East, since Canada is a friendly ally. However, committing to the \$12 billion pipeline only continues our dependence on carbon-based fuels. The tar sands crude is actually far dirtier than other forms of oil, releasing 80 percent more greenhouse gasses when burned and exhibiting more corrosive properties. The pipeline itself is massive, and will travel 1,661 miles from Alberta through Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma before ending in Texas at the refineries. This is especially concerning to Midwestern states – the pipeline would travel directly over the Ogallala Aquifer, the Midwest's primary source of drinking and irrigation water, and a leak in the pipeline could contaminate water resources for the entire region.

Stalling the pipeline's approval has been an uphill fight, as the ultimate decision rests with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The State Department is viewing the pipeline as an energy security issue without considering the complete environmental and economic impacts. Based on Sec. Clinton's comments to date, the pipeline likely would have already been approved if not for the work of a large coalition of advocacy groups to educate citizens in the Midwest about the pipeline and its effects. Thus far, one Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has been issued, to which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Department of Energy (DOE) issued strongly dissenting opinions. The primary advocacy groups developing the opposition strategy

are NWF, Natural Resources Defense Council, and The Sierra Club, but the coalition of groups activating on the issue is quite large.

In meetings with administration officials, Felice noted that the message they are sending to President Obama is this pipeline would be his legacy, because his actions on clean energy will speak louder than his words. The oil companies are being disingenuous about the impact this project will have on the oil markets; rather than decrease the cost of oil, it will likely increase it. Much of the refined oil will be used for the transportation market or be sold to Asia; there is no guarantee that the finished product will stay in the U.S. Part of the advocacy strategy is exposing the oil companies' real intentions with the pipeline – manipulating the oil market and undermining clean energy policy in the U.S.

RN Members asked insightful questions. Kathy Borgen asked if there were any Republicans supporting the pipeline in the affected states. Both Felice and Jeremy noted that Nebraska Senator Mike Johanns (R) has been one of the most vocal opponents in the Senate against the pipeline. They also noted that this issue is more regional than partisan. Martha Davis was curious about which countries use the oil produced from the tar sands – is the U.S. the largest consumer of Canadian oil, or do we ship it? Felice answered that the oil companies still own the crude when it arrives in Texas, and it's up to them to decide where to sell it. The U.S. is exporting more and more refined oil products, now totaling approximately 1.2 million barrels a day. The oil companies are effectively trying to manipulate prices in real time by shifting the supply around to different U.S. and world markets. Felice added that there is excess pipeline capacity now, and no one has asked the question about why a brand new pipeline is needed.

Martha followed up with a question about refinery capacity in the Great Lakes region. Felice answered that many of those refineries are currently applying for permits to increase capacity, but at the moment they can't take additional oil. The Gulf refineries already have sufficient capacity. Jeremy and Felice noted that there are additional impacts associated with refining the crude. Tar sands oil is heavier, requires specialized refining equipment, and creates more local air pollution around the refineries.

A member asked how the Canadian environmental groups are working on the issue. They responded that a couple of groups are working on it, but most don't want to deal with it because the tar sands have become such a large economic engine in Canada. Canadian groups also do not utilize the legal system like advocacy groups in the U.S. Corporate Ethics International is leading a lot of the coordination work and trying to keep the issue in the press.

As a final plea, Jeremy and Felice asked members for any connections they might have to Sec. Clinton or the State Department, because she has been very difficult to reach. The CEOs of the Green Group were unsuccessful in their attempts to schedule a meeting with her. In Congress, the coalition is working to get clean energy champions to pick up the issue, and in turn pressure the White House to not approve the project. There is still a little time before a final decision is issued, and in the meantime, the White House needs to know how voters feel about the pipeline and its potential effects on water supplies and wildlife.

RESOURCES:

To learn more about tar sands and the Keystone XL pipeline, visit www.nwf.org/tarsands.

Please feel free to contact our speakers with any follow up questions you may have.

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At the beginning of the teleconference call, Jeremy mentioned that he had just completed a press briefing on the issue before joining RN members. Here is an article that resulted from that briefing: ["Tar sands pipeline a 'disaster': US environmentalists"](#)