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Tar Sands Front Lines: British Columbia

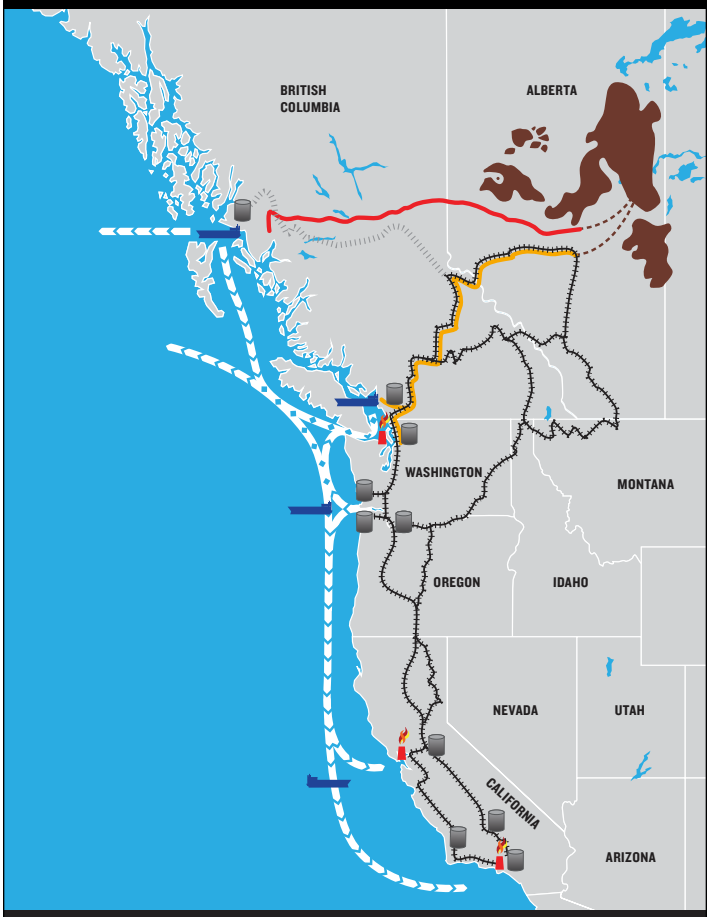
Desperate for routes to get their land-locked crude oil to refinery and export markets, the tar sands industry has long set its sights on British Columbia as a thoroughfare for tar sands exports. Recent developments in Washington, Oregon, and California suggest that the industry's West Coast plans are comprehensive and that British Columbia could become a gateway for tar sands to inundate the refineries, ports, rivers, and rail lines of its southern neighbors.

The industry hopes to move huge quantities of tar sands to ports in Kitimat and Westridge via major proposed pipelines across pristine landscapes and through local communities. The pipelines, if approved, would heavily increase tanker traffic, threatening not only British Columbia's waters, but also the entire American west coast. Indeed, as the tar sands industry's need for new transport capacity grows ever more pressing—and the true scope of a tar sands invasion of the West Coast is revealed—the fight British Columbians have been waging for years is finally awakening communities across the border.[1]

The tar sands extraction process wreaks havoc on the surrounding environment, but the danger doesn't stop there. One of the world's dirtiest fuels, this thick, flammable crude is remarkably treacherous to transport. By pipeline, rail, or tanker, tar sands brings high risks of explosive accidents and disastrous spills to water that are nearly impossible to mitigate.

This tar sands invasion has major ramifications for the entire West Coast. It requires a strong response from decision-makers who must recognize the critical links between proposed tar sands infrastructure and strong comprehensive climate policies, lowering oil consumption, and expanding clean transportation solutions.

Tar Sands Pathways to the North American West Coast



LEGEND

- Proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline
- Proposed TransMountain Pipeline
- Rail Lines
- Tanker
- Tanker Pathways
- Tar Sands Deposits
- Terminal Area
- Refinery Area

TAR SANDS' GATEWAY TO THE PACIFIC COAST

Public resistance to tar sands pipelines and tankers in British Columbia has kept the West Coast relatively tar sands-free. Beyond Kinder Morgan's aging Trans Mountain pipeline, few avenues exist for the tar sands industry to reach the terminals, ports, and refineries that would help it realize its expanding production goals.

But an emerging picture of the future suggests British Columbia could become a critical gateway for tar sands expansion plans targeting the United States and Asia. Along the entire North American west coast, the tar sands industry plans to use barges, tankers, pipelines, and trains to access new and expanded export and storage capacity totaling almost 4 million barrels per day (bpd), a six-fold increase over the region's current 690,000 bpd export and storage capacity. If this were to happen, at least 2,000 additional barges and tankers would be loaded at British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon ports, leading to unprecedented quantities of tar sands oil traversing the region's critical waterways and coastlines. With the American west coast's heavy crude refining capacity around 800,000 bpd, this surge in transport could transform the region into a conduit for the tar sands industry's international export goals. And while pipeline proposals to British Columbia's west coast pose the major threat, unit trains loaded with tar sands recently began crossing southeastern British Columbia into Idaho, destined for California and Washington refineries.[2]

THREATS TO BRITISH COLUMBIA

- **Pipelines:** The well-known Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline and Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline expansion proposals seek to bring more than 1.115 million barrels of additional tar sands oil to British Columbia's coast every day. To get from northern Alberta to British Columbia ports, these pipelines would cross mountain ranges, travel beside and across salmon-bearing rivers, and place hundreds of small communities at risk from a major spill. Public support for these pipelines is low. Two-thirds of British Columbians have expressed their disapproval with Enbridge's use of tankers to transport tar sands from Kitimat to North American and Asian markets while 70 percent of residents living near the Trans Mountain expansion's terminus oppose the project.

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■ **Tankers:** The pipeline proposals confronting British Columbia are only half the story. Once tar sands crude makes it to the British Columbia coast, it would still need to travel thousands of miles to reach refineries. Thus, both Enbridge and Kinder Morgan must depend on tankers to carry their tar sands to its final destination. To do this, their proposals envision adding nearly 700 oil tankers to British Columbia waters. This would include adding more than 400 tankers to Vancouver Harbour—a nearly seven-fold increase in oil tanker traffic. Further north, nearly 300 oil tankers would begin navigating the dangerous Pacific Ocean approaches at the mouth of the Douglas Channel in an area historically free from major oil tanker traffic. A single accident as these tankers make their way to the open ocean could devastate local economies, destroy fragile ecosystems, and lead to a long-term and largely impossible cleanup operation costing millions, if not billions, of dollars.

FIRST NATIONS AND PUBLIC OPPOSITION

Across British Columbia, there is substantial opposition to tar sands pipeline proposals and the threat of increased tanker traffic. Much of the fight against these tar sands expansion projects is being led by First Nations whose communities would be among the first to face catastrophic impacts from a pipeline or tanker spill. Over the years, more than 130 First Nations have signed the Fraser Declaration, calling for an outright ban on tar sands pipelines crossing British Columbia. Supporting them is an increasingly vocal coalition of civil society organizations and local governments who have joined the fight by filing or joining more than a dozen lawsuits and staging numerous protests.

Oil and Water Don't Mix: Marine Tar Sands Spills

The best-known spill of tar sands into water occurred in 2010 in a tributary of the Kalamazoo River. Following the rupture of an Enbridge tar sands pipeline, more than 3 million liters of diluted bitumen eventually found its way into the Kalamazoo. Responders struggled to contain the heavy bitumen, which sank beneath the water's surface and evaded conventional spill response measures that are designed to contain lighter, floating oil. More than four years later, the price tag for cleanup is well beyond $1 billion—and the tab is still open. Meanwhile, the surrounding community suffered a slew of health impacts, including hundreds of hospitalizations for cardiovascular, dermal, gastrointestinal, neurological, ocular, renal, and respiratory illnesses.

In addition to this lack of preparedness for and understanding of containing tar sands spills, review of cleanup measures has also revealed that some response activities may have actually worsened the spill's impacts. Subsequent studies have only raised the level of concern regarding tar sands and water. An Environment Canada study concluded that a spill into salt water is likely to lead to a combination of floating and sinking oil due to the presence of wave mixing energy and higher levels of sedimentation.[3] Other studies have shown that oil dispersants—the chemicals often sprayed on offshore oil spills to aid in oil decomposition—do not work at all on tar sands.


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PREVENTING THE FLOW OF TAR SANDS THROUGH BRITISH COLUMBIA

The substantial public opposition to tar sands pipelines and tanker traffic in British Columbia demands a response from decision-makers to ensure policies and regulations are in place to respond to this tar sands invasion of the entire North American west coast. The response must be wide-ranging, including not only a rejection of infrastructure proposals but a push for comprehensive climate policies as well. This includes policies that reduce fossil fuel use and spur low-carbon transportation and energy solutions such as broadened electric vehicle use and development of renewable and clean fuels. British Columbia can accomplish this by adopting some of the following policy solutions:

- Reject new tar sands-related infrastructure.
- Stop tar sands tanker traffic until federal and provincial officials understand the unique risks associated with tar sands spills and how to respond to them.
- Preserve and strengthen the existing low-carbon fuel policy while working with West Coast states to harmonize low-carbon transportation solutions, including accounting for increased emissions from petroleum and indirect land use emissions tied to biofuels.
- Resume annual increases in the provincial carbon tax program, targeting a price of at least $60 per metric ton of carbon dioxide by 2020.
- Expand the carbon tax to cover currently exempt sectors, providing an incentive for these industries to reduce emissions while increasing the competitiveness of renewable alternatives.
- Apply additional revenues from an expanded carbon tax to promote renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable transportation options.

Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise noted, the information in this fact sheet is based on Swift, A., Axelrod, J., and Droitsch, D., "West Coast Tar Sands Invasion," NRDC, April 2015. www.nrdc.org/land/files/west-coast-tar-sands-threat-report.pdf.

2 Schick, T., "Big Trainloads of Tar Sands Crude Now Rolling Through NW," *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, February 9, 2015, www.opb.org/news/article/tar-sands-crude-oil-moves-through-northwest-in-mile-long-trains-as-spill-planning-lags/.

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