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4 Things Every American Should Know About Tar Sands Pipelines

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Forty-five minutes. That's how much time it took a ruptured pipeline in Mayflower, Arkansas, on Friday to dump at least 84,000 gallons of tar sands crude [4] into a residential neighborhood and force the evacuation of 22 homes. The evacuations weren't just because the oil is messy or inconvenient. Highly toxic and carcinogenic solvents like benzene are used to dilute tar sands crude to make it pumpable. During a spill, those toxics evaporate into the air.

Just over two weeks. That's how much time we have left to tell President Obama he should reject the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline [5]. We'll be living with the consequences of his decision for a lot longer. The climate pollution that mining the tar sands would create is reason enough not to approve Keystone, but last weekend's disaster in Arkansas is a glaring reminder of the other reason: Tar sands crude is much riskier to transport than conventional oil.

The Pegasus pipeline that spilled in Mayflower has only about one-tenth of the carrying capacity that the Keystone XL would. We don't know yet whether it contaminated nearby Lake Conway, an important source of drinking water, but the same pipeline crosses 13 miles of the Lake Maumelle watershed. If the spill had happened there, it would have contaminated the water supply for most of central Arkansas.

That the spill didn't happen in an even worse location is not much consolation to the residents of Mayflower who don't know when, or even if, they will be able to return to their homes. Many of them had no idea there was an oil pipeline in their neighborhood, much less that it was carrying tar sands crude. This was a tough way to find out.

When it comes to tar sands pipelines, what we don't know will hurt us. Here's what every

American should know about tar sands pipelines:

1. Tar sands crude oil is much harder to clean up than conventional oil. That's because the bitumen that remains after benzene and other solvents evaporate is thick and heavy -- it sinks in water. Remember the Enbridge spill on the Kalamazoo River nearly three years ago? Despite a nearly \$1 billion cleanup effort, 38 miles of the river remain contaminated. [6]
2. Tar sands crude is much more likely to spill than conventional crude oil. TransCanada's first Keystone pipeline leaked 12 times in its first 12 months [7]. Because tar sands must be pumped at higher pressures and temperatures than conventional oil, it corrodes pipes faster.
3. Tar sands pipeline leaks are difficult to detect. It was 17 hours before the Enbridge pipeline that spilled on the Kalamazoo was finally shut off. We can be thankful that the spill in Mayflower was noticed in less than an hour, but that's only because a neighbor spotted it. Then again, it's hard to miss a river of oil flowing down your street. [8]
4. Current pipeline regulations and spill-response methods are completely inadequate for the higher risks posed by tar sands. That's another reason to reject Keystone XL, but it's also a problem for existing older pipelines, like the one that spilled in Arkansas, that have started carrying tar sands during the past decade. The Sierra Club is part of a broad coalition of landowners, former and current government officials, environmental organizations, renewable energy promoters and sportsmen's groups that has petitioned the EPA and the Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration to develop stronger safety standards for tar sands pipelines [9] and, in the meantime, put a moratorium on pumping tar sands crude.

Tragic as the disaster in Arkansas is, it could have been much worse. If the Keystone XL is built, it's a certainty that someday, somewhere, even more devastating spills will happen. It's only a matter of time. If you've already told President Obama where you stand, then ask your friends to do the same. [10] There's no excuse in the world for pursuing extreme oil like tar sands when we could be investing in clean energy instead.

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