

Wisconsin waters threatened by tar sands crude oil expansion

By Eric Hansen

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Whether you see Lake Superior and other Wisconsin waters as poetry or commodity, proposals for a massive expansion of tar sands crude oil shipments on and around the Great Lakes do not make sense. Among the waters vulnerable to Canadian pipeline company Enbridge's ill-advised plans are Lakes Superior and Michigan as well as the Bois Brule, Namekagon, Chippewa, Wisconsin, Fox and Rock rivers.

Connect the dots on Enbridge's efforts to quietly network thousands of miles of pipelines — a system that would lock in both Wisconsin and our region as a major transportation corridor to ship tar sands crude oil overseas to the world market for decades to come — and a reasonable citizen would be outraged.

Profit and jobs would go to Canada. Crude oil would go overseas. Toxic risk would stay here, sprinkled throughout our region in the crude oil spills, air quality and public health impacts that would certainly come.

Enbridge's piecemeal method, linking and converting already existing pipelines with new connectors, has largely escaped the intense public scrutiny and uproar the Keystone XL pipeline proposal has met — so far.

Tar sands crude oil spills are notoriously difficult to clean up well — and there are serious questions whether the tar sands corrosive qualities make pipeline ruptures inevitable. Tar sands' raw product is bitumen, similar to asphalt. To move it through a pipeline requires diluting, with benzene (a known carcinogen) for example, high temperatures and increased pumping pressure.

The tar sands project itself is a vast swath of northern Alberta, Canada; once pristine, now a notably polluted industrial landscape. This particularly dirty crude oil is already criticized for its role in magnifying climate issues and extreme weather. Now, the tar sands emerge as a serious threat to Earth's finest collection of freshwater: Lake Superior and the upper Great Lakes.

Worth noting: Tar sands developers want to triple production.

Enbridge's record merits alarm. Just 150 miles east of Milwaukee, our nation's largest inland crude oil spill began on

July 25, 2010, devastating the Kalamazoo River near Marshall, Mich. Cleanup is still incomplete; costs are passing the billion-dollar mark.

For 17 hours, through three shift changes and multiple alarms going off, Enbridge employees in their Calgary, Alberta, control room did not shut down the pipeline. That only happened when a Michigan utility worker called. Meanwhile, 840,000 gallons of crude oil spilled.

Key information was only shared a week later: The spill was tar sands, not conventional crude oil.

Enbridge's pipeline 67, the linchpin of the whole plan, runs from Alberta to Superior. Its proposal doubles its capacity to 880,000 barrels per day.

At Superior, the pipeline splits. One pipeline bisects Wisconsin on its way to Delavan before continuing south. Some of its crude oil would go to Chicago-area refineries; most is destined for ports and refineries on the Gulf of Mexico.

Another pipeline runs eastward from Superior, before crossing under the Straits of Mackinac to connect to Detroit-area refineries — and others on the Atlantic Ocean.

Furthermore, Calumet Specialties, a Superior refiner, wants to ship 13 million barrels per year of crude oil across Lake Superior and through the Great Lakes on barges.

"Both plans are unacceptable" (pipeline 67 expansion and oil barges on Great Lakes), a Detroit Free Press editorial proclaimed on May 9.

British Columbia, provincial neighbors of the tar sands, used similarly blunt language in a May 31 rejection of an Enbridge pipeline proposal, saying, "Trust me is not good enough in this case."

Wisconsinites should say no as well. Insist that federal and state permits for the Enbridge line 67 expansion, the oil barges and other hazardous crude oil proposals be denied.

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