




Alberta Tar Sands

Spending just a few days in Calgary, Alberta, one thing becomes perfectly clear: oil is Calgary, and Calgary is all about oil. And increasingly, the story of oil all across Alberta has become the story of tar sands. Many around the world have viewed with horror, or at least dismay, Canada's increased reliance on producing oil from its abundant tar sands fields — leading to the destruction of much of Northern Alberta, and the consumption of startling quantities of water and natural gas. What people in the States have been less likely to notice is that just as the drug merchants in Mexico are dependent on U.S. sales, so are the companies in Canada that extract oil from tar sands.

The United States imports more oil from Canada than from any other country. At a recent environmental conference held at the [Faculty of Law at the University of Calgary](#), Dean Alastair Lucas pointed out that most of the oil from the tar sands fields is destined for the U.S., and most of the investment dollars supporting the tar sands operations comes from the U.S.

According to University of Calgary's [Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy](#), because of the energy needed to extract it, tar sands oil has a much larger life-cycle carbon footprint than does conventional oil. This  means that President Obama's efforts to put a cap on carbon, and California's low-carbon fuel standard are significant threats to the economic well-being of many in Calgary. The [Calgary Herald reports](#) that when Alberta recently set up offices inside the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C., its mission was to make sure that U.S. climate policy does not interfere with Alberta's oil sales. The paper also reports that Alberta already "has lost a high-profile fight to persuade California to abandon its low-carbon fuel standard that seeks to eliminate transportation fuels with high 'life cycle emissions.'" The Herald also says that Alberta is fairing better in D.C., where a low-carbon fuel standard was recently removed from federal legislation.

Alberta's position is that while its oil might be dirty, the U.S. needs it, in order to break its addiction to oil from the Middle East. The Herald observes that this argument is losing its resonance, and oil lobbyists are now emphasizing the hope for future carbon sequestration in the tar sands fields.

Tar sands is not the only unconventional oil source with a big carbon footprint. The abundant supplies of shale oil in the United States would be even worse. It's the oil addiction that must be overcome, regardless of source.

