If you were President Obama, what would you do about the tar sands fields in Alberta? He is being asked to approve or reject a pipeline extension that would carry 900,000 barrels per day of Canadian crude deep into the United States. It has to be exceedingly tempting to just say "yes". After all, Canada is our biggest and friendliest source of oil, and at least the oil wouldn't be coming from offshore. And no one expects the U.S. to cut off its demand for oil overnight. Nonetheless, the tar sands pits in Alberta are just about the last place we should turn for crude oil. From all reports, harvesting Alberta tar sands is an environmental disaster. A new report from Ceres equates the environmental threats from tar sands with the hazards related to oil from the Gulf. There is also no doubt that it is a mistake from a greenhouse gas perspective.

I have mentioned these messy fields before. A colleague from the University of Wyoming now points to a guest column in the Missoulian, where Tom Woodbury of the Western Watersheds Project describes the ongoing process of extracting oil from Canadian rocks and sands as a slow-motion equivalent of the Gulf disaster. He points out that as a result of these processes, "a vast boreal forest the size of Florida will be laid to waste, fouling the water and turning one of the world's largest carbon sinks – storing 11 percent of the world's carbon and home to 166 million birds – into the largest single emitter of carbon dioxide on the planet." This is more than the usual case of the recovery of fossil fuels leading to massive carbon dioxide releases because the processing of tar sands is particularly energy and carbon intensive.

News reports about chemical tests are never as dramatic as the sight of oil-drenched birds and fish. Maybe that's why a study released in 2007 did not prompt a dramatic response from environmentalists in the lower 48. In that year, an ecologist with Treeline Environmental Research issued a report finding high levels of carcinogens and toxic substances in fish, water, and sediment downstream from the tar sands fields. The New York Times quoted a local health official as saying, "For years the community has believed that there's lots of cancer. When they drank from the water, there was an oily scum around the cup. We now know that there is something wrong." At the time, an Alaskan research scientist commented, "This could actually be worse, in some respects, than the Exxon Valdez."

Increasing the take-away capacity from the tar sands fields by 900,000 barrels per day is like drilling a large number of offshore wells. (Ceres reports that the plan is to eventually double that expansion.) But while industry representatives will argue that the Deepwater Horizon disaster was an unpredictable aberration, the environmental destruction in Alberta is a sure thing. Build the pipeline, and the oil will come. What is left behind will take lifetimes to repair. This is all so that the United States can maintain its unrestrained oil

habit — with foreign fuel, as well – even if it is from a friendly source.