Recommended arguments against tar sands Keystone XL Pipeline threat

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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On Dec. 15, I provided to Bill McKibben, author and founder of 350.org, several considerations for opposing the infamous tar sands pipeline. It is right now being forced down our throats if President Obama does not veto a spending bill. At the bottom of this recommendation, we provide an activist alert to fight the Senate's and the White House's tendency to compromise at the expense of the public's and nature's health.

In addition to well-known environmental objections to the Keystone XL Pipeline -- offered to counter the "jobs" and "lessen foreign oil" arguments by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives -- we recommend a long-term approach.

We need to shift the discussion so as to reframe the issues for sustainability. Unfortunately, most of us who care at all about ecological issues and who might get active, feel forced to try to endlessly stamp out brush fires. Well, here's a brushfire: the latest from a New York Times editorial for the Dec. 17 edition:

Negotiators were stalled on a separate bill to extend the payroll tax cut, able to agree only to continue it for another two months. Though Democrats dropped their demand to pay for it with a millionaires' tax, Republican leaders are still insisting on using the bill to advance the Keystone XL oil pipeline.
From the Times' news story on the agreement to extend the cut to two months:

...The agreement would also speed the decision process for the construction of an oil pipeline from Canada to the Gulf Coast, a provision necessary to win over Republicans who opposed the tax break... However, rank-and-file members of the House said on Friday that they were opposed to a short-term extension. Approval in that chamber, even with the provision on the Keystone XL pipeline, is no sure thing... Administration officials indicated that Mr. Obama would not veto the legislation even though the Keystone XL pipeline provision remained in the bill. They said they believed that the president could still delay the pipeline until environmental stipulations were met. "This provision does not mandate it," the administration official said, "it simply speeds up the review process for a decision."

Nonetheless, environmental advocates were unhappy. "We're stunned that the president would say one week that he's going to veto any provision that includes Keystone, and then cave the next week," said Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, an environmental group opposed to the pipeline. "Where I come from, people don't do that, but I guess this is Washington."

Here are the points I provided to Bill McKibben, shared with Energy Bulletin, an online publication of the Post Carbon Institute where McKibben is a Fellow. In anticipation that he would be sought out by the publication for a timely tar sands pipeline article or press release, the recommended points were given to Energy Bulletin. But in the absence of an article, the publication simply ran my memo to McKibben:

Lundberg to McKibben: Combatting the "jobs" argument for the XL pipeline

Jan Lundberg, personal correspondence with EB

I'm wondering what journalistic-activist response there will be right away to the tar sands pipeline gambit that the Republican House has sprung as part of the jobs and benefits legislation hitting Obama.

From AP, tonight: [Dec. 15]

"Boehner also left open the possibility of a compromise on another key sticking point — a House-passed provision that all but requires construction of the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada to Texas Gulf Coast refineries."

I know Bill McKibben's working on something, as he and I talked today about the "jobs" and "foreign oil" issues that the Republicans are trying to seize on.

Below is the gist of what I gave McKibben, as I told him "in no particular order." He liked all the points I gave. You're welcome to use my points as a sidebar for an article.

Jan

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Hi Bill,

Good to chat. Thanks for taking up the charge against oil madness in DC.

If the usual job creation schemes -- really for more expansion of the oil-intensive infrastructure and generating profits off what I call "the tanking oil economy" -- were instead about long term jobs, the jobs would be oriented toward getting off oil. To summarize what I mentioned today:

- If the automobile factories massively retooled for bicycle production, that would help workers because the jobs would be sustainable. And carbon emissions would dive, as would oil dependence.
If sail power were applied to cargo and passenger service on the seas, rivers and lakes, oil use would go down, as would carbon emissions, and jobs would be generated where ship building has almost died. Young people needing jobs and adventure can go sailing. The land connection for sail based trade & transport would be in part bikes and bike trailers.

- foreign oil and domestic oil are fungible, and the entire oil industry, from a New York trader to an OPEC gov't, are in one fraternity of trade on a daily basis.

- to maximize oil through tar sands is to illustrate the fact that conventional, easy to produce cheap oil has peaked.

- the fossil fuels-based economic establishment is beginning to die, so tar sands are a desperate attempt to maintain a strategic hold on the world. Boehner and others figure that if the Keystone doesn't run into the U.S. then a pipeline will get the stuff to BC and then to China. And the National Security State needs another bogeyman for the public to fear: China.

- we need to question the need for jobs, when good ones are rare, and instead replace the need for jobs by strengthening local economies through barter, boycotting corporate products, and caring for one another in families and neighborhoods. Energy saving brings people together, as in Victory Gardens for local food production via depaving and food-not-lawns.

- debt-for-nature swap between China and the U.S.: China owns massive U.S. debt, and can "collect" on it harmlessly while transforming the American lifestyle of energy waste: The U.S. would implement energy conservation and renewable energy measures that involve everything from policy change to individual incentives. (A local, city-council resolution campaign is being designed.) The carbon credit is given by the U.S. to China, in exchange for debt reduction, and China gets carbon-emissions reduction credit for the next Kyoto agreement. The U.S.-China treaty thus defuses saber rattling in the Pacific. Please see How China and America can work together to solve climate crisis.

- More about slashing carbon emissions and moving away from bunker fuel for shipping: People don't realize that only 16 of the biggest cargo ships today (sixteen) spew out as much air pollution [sulfur, etc.] as all the world's cars. I didn't crunch the numbers, but they come from a British study:

How 16 ships create as much pollution as all the cars in the world
and just as mindblowing,

Container ships slow down to speed of old clipper sailing ships

[Note: the net-energy yield from tar sands' oil is low, compared to fast-dwindling conventional oil. Please see the thorough study at the Oil Drum, which will hopefully be summarized on www.CultureChange.org soon.]

One hope I have is that in future when Congress or NPR hear from some "oil analyst," such a person is not always in the pay of Big Oil or so aligned. I met some more Congressmen in November so maybe I can someday testify and open up other issues than the usual consumer-economy ones!

From Mike Town, Director, SaveOurEnvironment.org
(info@saveourenvironment.org):

URGENT: STOP SENATORS FROM CAVING ON KEYSTONE XL!

Send an urgent message telling your Senators "Absolutely NOT!" before it's too late. Go to the website to register your opposition.

Bill McKibben's group 350.org has an activist alert webpage too: Telephone Barack Obama at 1-202-456-1111

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Further reading:

Sail Transport Network

Time's Running Out to Stop the Keystone Tar Sands Pipeline by Tara Lohan

Senate Leaders Agree on 2-Month Extension of Payroll - New York Times

An Agreement on Spending - New York Times

Bargainers reach deal to head off gov't shutdown - Associated Press, Dec. 15, 2011