

Protesters decrying oilsands need to do their homework

Numbers show environmental effect of 'dirty oil' greatly exaggerated

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Environmentalists lately have been taking centre stage with overheated campaigns against North American pipelines and Alberta's oilsands, leaving the industry and politicians on the sidelines, dismayed.

It's time for more balance in the debate between jobs and prosperity on the one hand, and carbon emissions on the other.

Truth usually lies somewhere between extremes, but the public lately has heard but one side of the story when it comes to the proposed Keystone XL and Northern Gateway Pipelines, and the oilsands.

The political class and industry players have let the environmental movement outmanoeuvre them. Their big-ticket lobbyists are talking only to the politicians, not the people.

The public has been left to believe the oilsands are a "carbon bomb," the "dirtiest oil on earth."

Actor Robert Redford has just come out with a film about the evils of Keystone XL.

The other week, the U.K. Tar Sands Network held an "oil orgy" stunt in London, with grease-covered protesters groping one another at a U.K.-Canada energy roundtable.

They're endlessly creative, pros at riling the public.

Yet, it was just last December when the academically distinguished Royal Society of Canada issued a report stating the oilsands don't deserve their negative environmental reputation.

Seven scholars authored the peer-reviewed report: "Is the oilsands industry the most environmentally destructive project on earth, as has been ... declared by critics of the industry?"

"Based on our review of the publicly accessible evidence, a claim of such global magnitude is not accurate."

I visited the oilsands a few months ago. It's no worse than any other mining operation I've toured.

Am I to believe some donation-reliant tarsands network regarding the oilsands' ranking of global destructiveness? Or the Royal Society authors, who are without vested interest?

To be fair, the Royal Society criticized governments for its laxity in monitoring the oilsands' environmental effects.

Politicians, particularly federally, need to clean up their act so as to not leave themselves vulnerable to the crusaders.

The oilsands, after all, are a resource development central to Canada's economic wellbeing, producing a good in freemarket demand.

Some facts: The oilsands account for of 0.1 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Their emissions in 2009 were equivalent to 3.5 per cent of emissions from the U.S. coalfired generation sector. Why aren't the activists out attacking America's "coal bomb?"

Moreover, oil companies in Alberta are working to lower the intensity of oilsands emissions and reclaim land occupied by tailings ponds.

And note, these ponds are part of every mining operation: A 2000 study by Burnaby company AGRA Earth and Environmental Ltd. estimates there are some 3,500 active tailings ponds globally.

Minable oilsands are projected to disturb only 0.1 per cent of the boreal forest region.

What's the incentive for governments and oil companies to keep spending billions on environmental innovations when they're slammed at every turn?

Let's be clear. A majority of protesters turning out to shut down the oilsands operations and proposed pipelines (and by the way, right now many dozen resource pipelines cover North America like a spider web) do indeed want a better world.

Actor and Keystone protester Daryl Hannah probably really believes there's only black and white in the world, instead of grey.

The fact is, oil is produced nearly everywhere it's found. It's dirty stuff.

People need it to run their cars, heat their homes, work at their computers.

Producers are trying to address the environmental issues cited by the activists.

It's time for folks to put down their placards, do their own research and ponder the compromises that life forces upon us everywhere and always.