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Obama's Interior Department Pushes Oil Shale Plan Threatening Massive Climate Pollution, Water Use

SALT LAKE CITY— The Bureau of Land Management announced this week that it is moving toward allowing dirty oil shale development that could be a double whammy for the environment, unleashing nearly a half a billion tons of greenhouse gases and consuming vast amounts Colorado River basin water. It would be the first commercial oil shale production facility in the United States.

The Bureau said that on April 8 it will release a draft environmental impact statement for the “Enefit American Oil Utility Corridor Project.” It would allow Enefit, an Estonian company, to build water, oil, gas and electric transmission across federal public land in Utah to enable oil shale mining on state on private land. Enefit hopes to process up to 1.2 billion barrels of kerogen oil — one of world’s most carbon-polluting fuels — with estimated lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions of up to 450 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, about the same as 100 coal-fired power plants emit in a year.

“President Obama was right when he said in his State of the Union that ‘[we’ve got to accelerate the transition away from old, dirtier energy sources](#)’,” said Ted Zukoski, an attorney at Earthjustice. “It’s time BLM got the memo and stopped wasting taxpayer money subsidizing companies that would foul our atmosphere and endanger our planet, and our future.”

“The Interior Department is working against President Obama’s climate goals here,” said Taylor McKinnon with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Enabling the development of one of the world’s dirtiest fossil fuels is the opposite of climate leadership. The administration should abandon this project now.”

“We don’t need to take on this environmental disaster that comes with developing the dirtiest fuel on the planet — oil shale,” said Rob Dubuc, senior staff attorney at Western

Resource Advocates. “Renewable energy innovations and improvements in energy efficiency make this fuel unnecessary to develop. BLM should not advance this project.”

The draft environmental impact study comes only months after the United States and countries around the world committed, at the Paris climate negotiations, to the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. Reaching that goal will require dramatic reductions in carbon pollution — the key driver of climate change — and leaving the vast majority of fossil fuel reserves in the ground. Enefit’s mining facility would expand development and use of one of the world’s highest carbon fuels.

“There is more energy in a similarly sized [baked potato](#) than in a chunk of oil shale,” said Steve Bloch, legal director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. “We know that burning oil shale in a giant oven can produce shale oil; the question that needs to be asked is whether proceeding with this type of project makes any sense in a carbon constrained 21st century. The unequivocal answer is no. The time has come to turn our backs on the carnival barker’s promise that oil shale will be answer to our nation’s energy needs.”

“It is true that Enefit has made the mining and production of oil shale work for the energy needs of Estonia. However, Estonia also produces more greenhouse gas emissions per capita than other European countries, including Russia,” said John Weisheit with Living Rivers and Colorado Riverkeeper. “What Estonia has, that Utah does not, is ample water supplies to process that oil shale. Ironically, the similarity between the governments of Utah and Estonia is their subsidy of dirty energy projects with public money.”

The proposed facility will be located in the Uinta Basin, approximately 12 miles southeast of Bonanza in Uintah County, Utah, near the Green and White Rivers. The project is designed to develop oil shale mining and a shale oil production complex, at full build-out producing about 28 million tons of raw oil shale ore rock per day and 50,000 barrels per day of refinery-ready shale oil from the Green River Formation.

“Oil shale is a thirsty industry,” said Anne Mariah Tapp with the Grand Canyon Trust. “The Colorado River Basin is already looking at up to a 27 percent decrease in April to July flows due to climate impacts. At a rate of up to four barrels of water per barrel of oil, Enefit’s project poses an unacceptable threat to limited Colorado River Basin water supplies. Both in terms of carbon footprint and water demands, the West’s water future would be drastically compromised by this oil shale program.”

“The legacy of the Green River will live or die on the decisions we as a country make here and now,” said Lauren Wood with Green Riverkeeper. “The Green River watershed cannot survive as a vibrant source of life in a desert if the BLM continues to view the landscape it runs through as a source of death and climate devastation. It’s time to close this chapter of our shared history where we strayed into such extreme and dangerous forms of energy; that isn’t our legacy, it’s our nightmare.”

“This oil shale project would be another significant source of pollution in an area that just can't take any more,” said Dr. Brian Moench with Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment. “During the drilling boom of 2013 the air pollution in the Uinta Basin was literally off the charts, as much as would be expected from 100 million cars, eight times more cars than in all of Los Angeles. It would be unconscionable to allow anything that would make that even worse.”

“A century’s worth of failed efforts has demonstrated that trying to turn rocks into oil is a fool’s errand, but somehow Enefit expects a different result this time,” said Bobby McEnaney, a senior analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council. “The last thing this administration should be considering is a proposal that amount to fossil fuel alchemy, particularly when cleaner energy sources are readily available.”

The Bureau of Land Management’s webpage for the project is [here](#).