

Oil Sands Mine Proceeds Despite Environmental Concerns



Main Canyon is an oasis in the high-mountain desert of the Tavaputs Plateau even during midsummer during a drought.

Burt and Christine DeLambert have raised cattle here for nearly four decades. But they'd never seen anything like this before: a dozen trout belly up dead in their spring-fed pond.

"You know if that was any place else and the fish started dyin,' they'd be pretty excited," says Burt.

There's no way to say if the strip mine had anything to do with the dead fish, but three state agencies have approved mining and processing tar sands on 317 acres of the rocky ridge above the DeLambert ranch. The first mine of its type in the United States is being built there by a Canadian company called U.S. Oil Sands.

The mine could be producing petroleum this winter in the Uintah Basin of eastern Utah. And, while the company behind the PR Spring Mine plans to showcase a new way of

mining oil sands that doesn't wreck the land and water, local ranchers are worried, and climate activists say any petroleum mining is a bad idea.

The DeLamberts don't oppose it on principle. But they do worry the mine could spoil the water or dry it up.

"We've always had the water," says Christine DeLambert. "And then this year, we're dry. I don't know if all that drilling they've done has had an impact on it."

Answers could be years away, and there's a lot at stake if the company and state regulators are wrong. The sage and pinon landscape here is alive with wildlife and prized for hunting. Nearby Colorado River tributaries carry water for 40 million people. And ranchers like the DeLamberts worry about the mining.

"Their wells are right above us," says Burt. "This concerns me a little bit, this does, especially over the water."

Christine adds: "If you didn't have the water down here, you couldn't live out here."

The water question also nags University of Utah geology professor William Paul Johnson, so he's brought students to Main Canyon to look for answers.

U.S. Oil Sands has a state water right to serve the 32,000 acres it's leased from Utah's state trust lands agency. Mining hasn't started, but one of the DeLambert's springs has dried up, and then those fish died.

"If you have plenty of water, they don't die," Burt tells Johnson, "they don't die."

"Are you noticing less water in there too?" Johnson asks.

"Oh, way less," Burt replies, "I doubt if there's even half."

Johnson offers to do some extra tests, but he says state regulators should have asked more questions from the start.

"Their decision was made without any real data," says Johnson. "The most substantive data they call on are the 180 core holes up at the ridge top. Those core holes were designed to find tar, not to investigate the hydrology."

Johnson has trouble understanding how anyone could think there's no water here to harm, that the water above on the ridge isn't connected to the water below in the canyon.

“That’s like looking in the sky and saying there’s no water there,” says Johnson.” And, of course, we know water comes from the sky. Right? And you don’t always see it there as vapor. Just like in these ridge tops -- it’s moving downward, it’s on its way down to the groundwater system. The springs represent that groundwater system.”

On the ridge 600 feet above Main Canyon, it’s obvious why U.S. Oil Sands officials are so excited. Dark oil streaks the tawny canyon walls. Oil oozes from the ground in places, and even the warm morning breeze smells like petroleum. This tar – or oil sands, as the company calls it – even forms a natural pavement on dirt roads.

Dan Kline, who engineered the mine for U.S. Oil Sands and manages it, walks me into the test pit, where about 30 feet has been scooped from the land surface to expose a sideways stripe of oil. He taps a chunk of dark rock.

“It’s like soft pavement.”

“Yeah,” says Kline.

Between my fingers, it feels like a lump of gritty grease.

But Kline sees it as a game-changing opportunity for his whole industry.

“The method that US Oil Sands has developed and will use for this site is a method that uses a citrus-based solvent,” he explains. “We’re able to take the sand after the oil’s been recovered from it and take that sand by truck back to the mined out pits, fill the pits back up with absolutely no tailings ponds.”

Kline says US Oil Sands’ process recovers all but a small fraction of the bitumen and the biodegradable solvent. US Oil Sands is anxious to prove its process is safe and economical.

Mike McKee, a pro-energy county commissioner, is eager to see the company succeed. He says around half of the nation’s oil sands are here with the revenue potential to replace the taxes that pay for Utah schools.

“There’s a lot of resource for us there, a lot of opportunity, and a lot of jobs,” McKee says, “and it’s not just for this county.”

McKee insists that the PR Springs mine won’t mean a denuded landscape and vast ponds of toxic tailings like Canada’s seen.

“There’s a lot of misinformation that continues to be purported,” says the county

commissioner. "You know, people have got to be talking about the newer technologies because that's what's going to be utilized as we move forward."

U.S. Oil Sands officials are eager to prove their process is safe, that it can transform an industry.

But climate activists still oppose it. They want fossil fuels like oils sands to stay in the ground because of global warming. Some of them have been arrested for protesting U.S. Oil Sands. They hold vigil at a camp across the road from bitumen processing plant.

The camp's below the mine's namesake, PR Spring, and activist Will Munger invites the scientists to camp here. He wants everyone to see firsthand what's at stake.

"The global implications of climate change of tar sands development are that, if we build the infrastructure, if we start mining tar sands, if this becomes locked in, our ability stop global climate change will be completely undermined," he says.

People concerned about the water scored a small victory recently when regulators ordered US Oil Sands to monitor nearby springs based on evidence gathered by Johnson's research team. Company officials plan to be processing oil above Main Canyon by next spring.