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Protesters Arrested at America's First Tar Sands Mine

By Zoë Schlanger

The Uintah County sheriff's department arrested 21 protesters who chained themselves to a fence at the construction site of the first tar sands mining operation in the U.S., in the Uintah basin of northeast Utah, according to the activist group Utah Tar Sands Resistance.

"Uintah sheriffs used force to pull the protesters apart, and also targeted those providing media coverage. One protester is reported as injured," stated a post from Peaceful Uprising, another activist group.

The sheriff's department has declined to comment on the arrests. The Utah Supreme Court dismissed a case against the project last month.

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Though the Uintah mine, owned by Canadian-based US Oil Sands, is the first tar sands mine in the US, Canada has been heavily mining the Alberta region for tar sands for several years. The heavily contested Keystone XL pipeline would transport Canadian bitumen--the stuff extracted from tar sands--from Alberta to Texas. Earlier this year, the popular cartoonist behind "Hark! A Vagrant" published a personal

narrative of her experience working on a Canadian tar sands mine, illustrating a bleak milieu of accidental death and environmental loss.

In February, as the U.S. debated the future of the Keystone XL, an Alberta family doctor spoke at a briefing to US senators about what he portrayed as the largely ignored but very serious health risks that come with tar sands operations, according to the Vancouver Observer.

Dr. John O'Connor told the senators that rates of rare cancers, like bile duct cancer, have shot up to 400 times the normal rate in Fort Chipewyan, a tiny community downstream of the oil sands mines. The Canadian government, meanwhile, states on its website that there is “insufficient evidence” to link the cancer rates in Fort Chipewyan to the tar sands operations.

“These are published, peer-reviewed studies that indicate that the government of Alberta and Canada have been lying, misrepresenting the impact of industry on the environment,” said O'Connor.

US Oil Sands estimates it will produce 184 million barrels of bitumen from its Utah mine once operations begin. Bitumen is nothing like conventional crude oil. It is thick and sticky, and often comes in chunks. It has to be diluted to flow through pipelines. The chemical mixture used to dilute the bitumen is a trade secret, but is known to often include the human carcinogen benzene. When diluted bitumen, or “dilbit,” spills--as one million gallons of it did in the Kalamazoo River in Michigan in 2010--cleanup is a new and under-researched challenge. Nearly four years after the Kalamazoo spill, officials say cleanup is just wrapping up.

Much of the uproar over tar sands focuses on the impact its production has on the environment. Extracting the oil from tar sands is an extremely energy-intensive task: It takes 4,000 pounds of oil sands solids to produce 20 gallons of gasoline, according to [Inside Climate News](#), and mining for it uses up a whopping one-fifth as much energy as it produces, [according to a report](#) by the nonprofit Post Carbon Institute.

Processing the tar sands generates approximately [14 percent more greenhouse gas emissions](#) than the average oil used in the U.S.

Utah's Uintah basin is already the site of one of the nation's largest current oil booms, with some [1,200 oil and gas wells](#) and another 25,000 new wells [under proposal](#). The state is currently investigating whether Vernal, the biggest town in the basin, is currently experiencing [a spike in infant deaths](#). The group Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment believes the infant deaths are [linked](#) to the increase in toxic emissions from the oil and gas operations.

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