

Editorial: Tar sands extraction unproven and risky

Do not extend tar sands test area.

PUBLISHED: JULY 3, 2015 07:00AM

UPDATED: JULY 3, 2015 07:00AM

Folks who claim they can profitably extract some usable form of petroleum from the tar sand deposits that lie at the edge of Utah's Tavaputs Plateau have not done a solitary thing to prove that their process will work, much less that it can work without doing unacceptable damage to the area's scarce water supply.

And water is scarce enough in that neck of the desert that any damage is unacceptable.

Yet representatives from the Canadian-owned (not that there's anything wrong with that) U.S. Oil Sands already want state officials to allow them to expand their 64-acre test site to a 316-acre experiment.

That permission should be withheld until we see proof that a supposedly new way of pulling tar sands from Utah won't devastate our fragile ecosystem as the old way of extracting tar sands from Alberta has clearly done to theirs.

The huge scars in the land of what were once Alberta's forests have been documented photographically by National Geographic and The Atlantic. A writer for the British newsmagazine The Economist began a report with, "One of the bleakest scenes of man-made destruction is the strip mining of oil sands in the forests of Alberta, Canada." The large amounts of energy, water, steam and chemicals needed to extract a proto-petroleum substance called bitumen has earned the substance the label of "The World's Dirtiest Oil."

Utahns, of course, are reassured that the process to be used in extracting our tar sands will be much less destructive than the one that has laid waste to large swaths of Canada. That's a claim the state is being asked to take on faith.

Even less credible is the claim by U.S. Oil Sands that the test site contains no groundwater and that planned activities there will not affect groundwater anywhere else.

And that's a claim which Bill Johnson, a professor of geology from the University of Utah, has called thoroughly bogus. Johnson has told the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining that he is "100 percent" sure that the site of the tar sands test mine is hydrologically linked to the mostly underground network of natural springs that are the major source of water for many surrounding canyons.

Befouling them would do irreparable damage to the most precious of resources, all for the benefit of some investors who dangle millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs before a community that is slim on both, investors who wouldn't have a second's hesitation about walking away and leaving Utah with a huge mess if their dreams don't pan out. Or even if they do.

Let U.S. Oil Sands prove their trickery on the land they already have approval for. Otherwise, send them packing.

redistributed.