

What tar sands mining means for Utah

Guest Columnist Tory Hill | Posted: Thursday, July 16, 2015 9:29 am

On June 30 in Salt Lake City, the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM) held a public hearing addressing the Canadian U.S. Oil Sands request for additional acreage for its tar sands mining permit at PR Springs.

The U.S. Oil Sands representative and Tom Faddis from SITLA had the audacity to say this mine would have no significant impact on the land, air and water in Utah. Thank you to University of Utah geology Professor Bill Johnson for actually doing a study on the water.

Too bad it wasn't done before the first permit was issued. No one in the state seemed to think it necessary to do a water study before issuing a permit. Johnson did the study without state help, relying on donations from wonderful groups like Living Rivers and individual people who care, while SITLA, UDOGM and the Utah Division of Water Quality seemed to be more than happy about taking the company's word that there just isn't any water up there.

The whole argument at the meeting centered around the questionable presence of water on this one ridge top and whether or not pollutants from the mine would travel down one side of the ridge to the springs below. Johnson asserted he was 100 percent sure that there was in fact water and that it could be impacted by the mining.

As I was driving home, I realized that there was a huge elephant in that meeting room and no one was talking about it. This is a test pit! 64 acres increased to 316 acres is not really a big deal, right? No bigger than the Atlas tailings pit in Moab. Though this expansion on the test pit is only for another 252 acres, when we are talking about water and possible contaminants to the perennial springs, we must take into consideration that US Oil Sands already has the lease on 32,000 acres of land on the Tavaputs for tar sands mining. Utah has a possible 91,000 to 132,000 acres of tar sands deposits.

It was hard for me to grasp what that really meant, so I thought I'd do the math.



Tory Hill

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32,000 acres = 50 square miles. 91,000 acres = 142 square miles. 132,000 acres = 206 square miles.

Wow!

That's one mile wide by 206 miles long, or a mile-wide swath of land from Moab to Salt Lake. This is strip mining, so the destruction is total. The majority of tar sands deposits in Utah are in places like the Tavaputs, Canyonlands and Circle Cliffs. It is the dirtiest energy on the planet. Conventional crude oil takes one barrel to produce 13 to 25 barrels. Tar sands takes one to three, or one to five in the best case scenario. They want to refine this in SLC and Green River. Yeah for Utah air!

On July 4, Canadians held a nationwide protest against tar sands. We should listen to them. They know. The next day, 10,000 people participated in the Toronto March for Jobs, Justice and the Climate, to stop tar sands mining and make a call for a justice-based transition to a new energy economy in which corporate polluters pay and ordinary people benefit. What a great concept.

SITLA is looking to cash in on \$160 million in royalties from U.S. Oil Sands, if it mines the entire 32,000 acres. It is selling the destruction of our air, water and some of our most beautiful land so this mining company can leave us with a ruined and potentially toxic landscape at the top of the watershed for 40 million people – all for the equivalent of about 0.54 cents for every person in the state.

Remember that the Atlas tailings pile is costing taxpayers \$1 billion to move it away from this very same watershed after Atlas went bankrupt. That is \$333 for every person in the state. Who can say how long U.S. Oil Sands will be in business and what kind of toxic legacy will be left to us to clean up once they are gone? They want us to be the test subjects for their new way of extracting the tar from the sand, which hasn't even been used in Canada.

I believe our children and their children's children would be much better served by SITLA to have these tar sands left in place in an ecological trust for future generations and in tribute to the fact that Utah leaders chose not to allow tar sands mining in Utah. Please encourage your leaders, SITLA and UDOGM to keep our beautiful state free from tar sands mining now and forever. If SITLA needs the money so bad, maybe we could all just give them 50 cents.