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## Will Utah Oil Sands Project and Water, If There is Any, Mix?

*A 2010 mining permit's validity is being reviewed by the state's Supreme Court, which heard arguments last month.*

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David Hasemyer



Conservationist John Weisheit visits a planned tar sands mine in eastern Utah. Weisheit is on a mission to protect this land from development. Credit: David Hasemyer

A spunky little environmental organization, essentially a one-man show with a small supporting cast, continues to battle a Canadian company's effort to establish [the nation's first sizeable tars sands strip mine](#) on an arid plateau in eastern Utah.

The issue, as always, is water. And the oratories, as always, are impassioned.

John Weisheit, the conservation director of Moab, Utah-based [Living Rivers](#), and his allies at [Western Resource Advocates](#), a non-profit environmental law and policy organization with offices in seven states, are still trying to convince state officials that there is water in the Book Cliffs region—and that it should be protected from the planned tar sands mine.

Now they've got a [new study](#) that they say further supports their position.

But Utah officials say there is little or no water in the area. That's a key reason why they gave [U.S. Oil Sands](#) a mining permit in 2010 without requiring the company to obtain a water pollution permit or do any water monitoring at the site.

At the center of the bickering is U.S. Oil Sands CEO Cameron Todd, who says the company's processing system is so safe that it couldn't jeopardize groundwater.

"The issue is not whether there is ground water—the issue is what impact does the project have on local resources including water resources," Todd said. "The process we employ uses bio-degradable solvents that don't leave behind any harmful elements. There is nothing that can cause any harm; not a thing."

Most of the world's tar sands oil, or bitumen, is found in Alberta, Canada, but smaller deposits are also found in Utah and a few other states. The [Utah Geological Survey](#) estimates the Utah tar sands, including both state and federal land, hold 25 billion barrels of oil.

Until fairly recently, extracting bitumen wasn't profitable. But new production techniques and rising international prices have made it more attractive. If the controversial Keystone XL pipeline is approved by the U.S. State Department, it will carry Canada's tar sands oil to the Texas Gulf Coast.

U.S. Oil Sands expects its 213-acre mine in Utah to produce 2,000 barrels of oil a day. Because of the legal skirmishes, and the challenge of finding investors for the project, the company doesn't expect to open the mine until 2015. If the first mine is successful, the company has drilling rights to almost 5,800 additional acres of state-owned land.

Last month, Living Rivers and Western Resource Advocates took their fight against the mine to the Utah Supreme Court, which is still weighing the case. And Weisheit, armed with yet another study he says proves that precious water is at risk, is considering asking state officials to reconsider the mining permit.

The study was done by William Johnson, a professor of geology and geophysics at the University of Utah, and five colleagues. It describes a complex and fragile aquatic system that would be threatened by tar sands mining on the plateau.

Water from rain and snow melt soaks into the ground on the ridge tops – where the strip mining and tar sands process will take place – then migrates in all directions to feed springs and aquifers at lower elevations, Johnson said in an interview with InsideClimate News.

"The state doesn't seem to recognize that the water that emanates from springs and seeps has to come from somewhere," Johnson said.

Todd argues that mining the tar sands is a boon to the environment. His reasoning is that when bitumen is removed it eliminates the possibility that it might percolate into and contaminate any ground water in the area.

"You take what is naturally polluting the area and cleaning it up," Todd said "It's akin to moving into a Super Fund site and cleaning it up."

Weisheit, a Colorado River guide who once funded Living Rivers with the proceeds from an ice cream shop on Moab's main street, said he will consult with his partners to decide whether to try again to persuade Utah mining officials to reconsider the mining permit, this time using the new water study to back up their argument.