

# Keystone Pipeline, Tar Sands Oil, and Climate Change Are Not in Our National Interest

**Peter Lehner**, Executive Director, New York City

Over the next few months, the State Department will examine whether the proposed [Keystone XL pipeline](#) running from the Alberta [tar sands oil fields](#) to the Texas Gulf Coast is in America's national interest.

To answer that question, you have to decide what kind of future you want for our country.

Do you want America to create cars that can go twice as far on a gallon of gas, [employ](#) 150,000 workers to build, and cut our oil use by more than 3 million barrels a day?

Or do you want America to remain addicted to fossil fuels and to accelerate the climate change will worsen storms, increase disease, and flood coastlines? Do you want the U.S. to become the middleman to enrich foreign oil companies?

America isn't accustomed to being in the passenger seat, and there is no reason we should start handing over the controls to Canadian oil companies now.

Because that's what the Keystone XL pipeline would entail. It isn't designed to benefit America; it is designed to benefit tar sands operators.

Oil companies acknowledge they plan to use the pipeline to export their product. Operators in Alberta's tar sand fields often refer to themselves as landlocked. That wouldn't be a problem if your major market were the enormous land mass to the south. But if you want to export to Asia and if British Columbia hasn't let you build a pipeline to its ports because of safety concerns, then you pursue a pipeline to the closest deepwater port: Port Arthur, Texas.

Once the tar sands oil hits the transportation network in Port Arthur, it can go anywhere in the world. TransCanada, the company behind the Keystone XL pipeline, told regulators that 90 percent of the pipeline's initial capacity would go to six shippers. Those shippers include Shell, Total, and Valero—the largest fuel exporter in the United States. Their statements to investors and regulators leave no doubt they plan to use tar sands oil to produce diesel fuel for export.

The Keystone XL's tar sands oil will be exported, because America doesn't need it. Our nation is already a net exporter of finished petroleum products. That's why a good deal of Keystone's capacity will end up on the international market.

Meantime, being the middleman for Canadian tar sands opens us to some significant risks here on American soil. The pipeline would cut 1,700 miles through farms, ranches, and towns. It would run on top of the Ogallala Aquifer—the source of drinking water for 2 million people—and through nearly 2,000 rivers, streams, and water bodies.

It isn't a question of if the pipeline will rupture in one of these places; it is a question of when.

In July, the Silver Tip pipeline operated by Exxon [ruptured](#), spilling 42,000 gallons of oil into the Yellowstone River. Last July, the Enbridge pipeline [ruptured](#) in Michigan, sending 840,000 gallons of tar sands bitumen into the Kalamazoo River watershed. The EPA [says](#) it will take years to clean up the spill.

With both of these spills, pipeline operators denied they carried tar sands oil. In the Kalamazoo spill, a journalist working for NRDC [uncovered](#) the news. In the Yellowstone spill, [not even the regulators knew](#) tar sands oil had gone through the pipeline. It is interesting to ponder why executives feel the need to lie about their product.

As perilous as these spills have been, the even greater danger of trafficking 900,000 barrels of tar sands oil every day is climate change. Instead of shifting us away from fossil fuels, the pipeline encourages us to substitute one type of oil for another. Sure, the new oil comes from a friendlier nation, but it is dirtier—much dirtier. Producing and burning tar sands oil generate three times as much carbon pollution as conventional crude.

If we say that the Keystone XL pipeline is in our national interest, then we are saying fossil fuel addiction is in our national interest. We are saying that climate change is in our national interest. We know neither is true.

Allowing a pipeline to carry dirty fuel through our backyards opens us and indeed the entire world to more intense climate change. It forces us to accept all liability while receiving no benefit. And it puts TransCanada and tar sands operators in the position of calling the shots.

That won't generate a brighter future for our country.

We don't need the Keystone XL pipeline. But we do need the jobs and clean air benefits that will come from building better cars that

reduce carbon pollution and make our nation a leader—not a middleman—in the international clean energy market.