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'Tipping Point': A primer on the Alberta tar sands

Charles Morris | Nov. 7, 2011 Eco Catholic

As more attention is brought to the proposed Keystone Pipeline that would bring Alberta Tar Sands Oil from Canada through the central United States to refineries in Texas, people of faith are looking for resources to help them understand the issues involved and who will be affected. *Tipping Point: The End of Oil* [1] is a powerful new documentary produced by Clearwater Media. It serves as a primer for parish adult education, and justice and peace groups.

Tipping Point, first shown on CBC's *Nature of Things* in January, introduces us to the real stories of real people whose health and way of life have been tragically upended by the "biggest construction project on the planet." The movie begins with the story of the indigenous people of Fort Chipewyan, who live downstream from the Tar Sands and have been dying in disproportionate numbers from rare forms of cancers.

The lines become drawn. On the one side are the First Nation of Canada and the intrepid scientists led by Dr. David Schindler of the University of Alberta. On the other side are the petroleum companies and the Alberta government. We follow the story of Francois Paulette, a famous chief of the Dene nation and a champion of indigenous rights, who takes up the cudgel representing the folk of Fort Chipewyan in bringing public attention to the deleterious impacts that processing operations have on their survival.

Initially, the Alberta government insists that there is no harm from the operation. A physician who worked with the Fort Chipewyan community and acted as a whistleblower was investigated for malpractice and driven out of the community. However, with the persistent challenge of Dr. Schindler, the support of environmental groups and especially the involvement of the Hollywood director James Cameron, the tables are turned. [Mr. Cameron is Canadian by birth. Pandora, the setting for the movie *Avatar*, is based in part on the Alberta Tar Sands.] The Alberta government finally admits publicly that the monitoring system had been primarily PR.

Greater moral issues are raised. The process of extraction is very energy-intensive and releases far more greenhouse gases than traditional drilling methods. Can the need for more oil from North American sources justify the impacts on future generations? What is the trade-off between economic development and environmental justice? In a time when peak oil is now a reality, what is the best path forward for real energy security? And what is the role of the United States, since the U.S. is by far the biggest customer for Tar Sands oil?

Tipping Point runs 90 minutes and has been nominated for a number of awards. To see the trailer and for information how your group can order the film, go to their website [1].

As the federal and state governments discern what the Keystone Pipeline might mean, *Tipping Point* provides a powerful and timely reminder that there are real consequences to real people, both now and into the future. And as the recent protests at the White House demonstrate, people of faith who are a voice for the voiceless [i.e. minorities, future generations and the land] are called to have their voice heard at the table.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/24/2014 - 14:29*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/tipping-point-primer-alberta-tar-sands

Links:
[1] http://www.tippingpointdoc.ca