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Canada tar sands issues show how important Keystone XL pipeline conversation is

Sharon Abercrombie | Jun. 24, 2013 Eco Catholic

It is unclear whether President Barack Obama's Tuesday speech on climate change at Georgetown University will include any references to the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. Recent major flooding in and around Calgary and near Fort McMurray in Alberta, the site of the tar sands extraction, makes it imperative he do so.

In case readers need a refresher, the pipeline is a TransCanada project, which would transport heavy crude oil from Canada's oil sands region to Gulf Coast refineries. The United States is expected to make a ruling sometime this year on whether or not to approve the pipeline. It would transport 830,000 barrels per day through the United States, and environmentalists worry that the pipeline would raise greenhouse gas emissions.

On Thursday in Turner Valley, river debris from rising floodwaters caused a pipeline to rupture, according to CBC [1]. The break caused a release of sour gas that contains 1 percent hydrogen sulfide, a colorless, flammable gas that smells like rotten eggs and is poisonous if inhaled, CBC reports. Emergency crews had to evacuate 50 homes near the pipeline while they contained the rupture.

DeSmog Canada says [2] the flooding in the heart of the Alberta tar sands "dramatically illustrates the threat to Canada's 'Serengeti,' " the Mackenzie River basin. Days before the flooding in Fort McMurray, a panel of international science experts said the almost 80 square miles of toxic wastewater lakes near rivers like the Athabasca pose a threat to one of the world's most important ecosystems, according to DeSmog Canada, a website that labels its purpose as working "to clear the air and to explore solutions for cleaning up Canada's polluted public square."

Henry Vaux Jr., a resource economist at the University of California, Berkeley and chair of the Rosenberg International Forum on Water Policy, told DeSmog that "what happens in the Mackenzie River Basin has global consequences."

Vaux chaired a report issued by nine Canadian, American and UK scientists [3] that said the largest threat to the basin is a potential breach in one of the many tailing ponds -- an engineered dam and dyke system [4] -- or wastewater lakes, sending the toxic water into the Athabasca River, a major tributary of the Mackenzie.

A breach in one of the wastewater impoundments in the winter "would be virtually impossible to remediate or clean-up" if the tailings liquid got under the ice, the report says.

Even without floodwaters, the tailing ponds at one Suncor tar sands mine are less than 50 miles from the Athabasca River edge, says DeSmog Canada. And there is the prospect of other dangers. Earlier this month, the Energy Resources Conservation Board, the Alberta government's industry regulator, released a report [5] stating that tar sands companies have failed to comply with pre-existing agreements to limit the amount of water used in tar sands extraction and processing as well as the amount of polluted water that ends up in the region's growing toxic tailings ponds, though the report notes that the companies have committed resources toward

meeting the agreements and has made some progress since 2009.

"The immediate question is apparent: what threat does the flooding pose to the massive tailings ponds lining the Athabasca River and the millions of litres of toxic contaminants they contain?" DeSmog Canada asks.

Further south in the United States, what could massive flooding do to damage the Keystone XL pipeline? Obama's speech on climate change needs to address this issue. Silence is not always golden.

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