

## Canadian Experience

The Uinta Basin, already accustomed to conventional oil and gas exploration, is on the verge of an unprecedented expansion into unconventional energy development. Mining for bitumen and kerogen may create thousands of new jobs. Revenue to state coffers could support local schools; county governments would be better able to provide infrastructure as the population swells. There will be benefits, but there will also be burdens.

Rob Dubuc is an attorney with Western Resource Advocates in Salt Lake City. He describes listening to a Canadian discussing his country's experience with oil sands development.

*He said, "I hope that the United States can learn a lesson from the way we went about it. We went too fast. There were consequences we didn't understand. Learn the lessons from us." But it's a mess up there. It's not something we want to repeat here. They're in basically a swamp and they use water for their process and they have tailing ponds that birds fly into and never fly out. We're never going to have that here because it's too dry and because of the chemical composition of the tar sands out here. We're not going to have the ugliness that you see up there. Our ugliness is going to be different. You're going to take the Book Cliffs area and you're going to turn it into a strip mine and you're going to see this incredibly ugly scar.*

Dubuc spoke about differences between environmental protection laws in the United States and Canada.

*We have very strong environmental laws in this country. My understanding from interfacing with groups up in Canada is that their laws are nowhere near as stringent as ours. Even within the state of Utah there are laws that have to be complied with. Just because the state government wishes those laws didn't exist, doesn't mean that they don't; they do and we intend to make sure they're complied with.*

Dubuc was amused by the antics of those anti-mining protestors who showed up on US Oil Sands' doorstep at PR Spring. He feels that their intentions were well meant even if they were a bit inflammatory.

*The citizens of the state are entitled to have input into that process. Right now the focus has been on Utah, but what happens in Utah is going to be reflected on a national level as we start to bring in federal lands into this process and the development of oil shale and tar sands on federal lands. Federal land managers are going to have to make a decision and the taxpayers of the United States have a vested interest in that decision and they need to know what's going on, so that they can voice their opinion of whether their land should be used in that way.*

What can be learned from Canada's experience with oil sands? Will Utah have the foresight to put away money that might flow from the energy industry? Norway has; Alberta hasn't. Or will that money just be reinvested in energy infrastructure? The social fabric of energy-dependent

communities can become one-dimensional, relying exclusively on the fortunes and largess of energy corporations. A small home in Fort McMurray costs \$600,000. Will all residents of Vernal be able to ride along on the ski-jump of upward mobility?

Rallying cries of 'national independence from foreign energy' may soon be heard in unfamiliar languages. Chinese, Saudi Arabian, Venezuelan, and Norwegian investors already influence corporate decisions in Alberta. In Utah, foreign investment is obvious—USOS is based in Calgary; Enfit American Oil is Estonian. Total of France recently mainlined a \$400 million infusion into Red Leaf Resources.

Muskeg and the boreal forest have been irreparably harmed in northern Alberta. Do we really know what forest and grassland restoration will look like after mining has finished leveling the hills and dry valleys of Utah? US Oil Sands is content to let state regulatory agencies make that determination; are we? US Congressman Rob Bishop is engineering a land swap in five eastern Utah counties, a move supported by industry and many environmental groups that could protect some priceless landscapes, and subject others—like the Uinta Basin—to an onslaught of industrial development. As Alberta's oil sands expanded, many Canadians shrugged and said, "It's just empty forest." Should we do the same?

Despite reassurances, unexpected health consequences may occur. In Canada, cancer has spiked among the people of Fort Chipewyan, a native community downstream from mines along the Athabasca River. Beyond a demonstrated increase in ozone, there is as yet no solid evidence of health threats to people of the Uinta Basin. Increased solubility of bitumen may or may not release carcinogens into the environment, and those chemicals may or may not travel beyond PR Springs toward the thirty million people who live downstream. Bill Johnson suggests that tailings piles at PR Springs at least be lined to prevent seepage into groundwater that he believes is present. But would that be enough to prevent downstream contamination?

Industry reassurances and environmental exhortations notwithstanding, knee-jerk answers to these questions are not good enough. People's lives and jobs hang in the balance. So does the health of a large swath of landscape that few people might ever get to know.