

Green Scene: Why I am opposed to the Kinder Morgan Pipeline

by Elaine Golds

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The communities of Coquitlam, Burnaby as well as beautiful Burrard Inlet are presently facing a proposal for a massive pipeline to carry diluted bitumen from the Alberta tar sands to be shipped from the Westridge terminal in Burnaby to points overseas. While Kinder Morgan has not yet decided exactly which route the pipeline will follow through parts of Coquitlam (alternative routes are shown at <http://www.transmountain.com>), it will be a tripling of the capacity of the present pipeline which has been operating since 1953. Soon, the National Energy Board is expected to initiate an Environment Assessment under rules recently made much more restrictive regarding public input. I have already decided that I oppose the construction of this pipeline. Here are some of my reasons why:

My first concern is the looming threat of global warming. If this generation does not take action to minimize it, we are being utterly irresponsible to future generations. Scientists have warned us that the nations of the world must absolutely limit carbon dioxide emissions to avoid causing no more than a further 2 degree elevation of average temperature because anything beyond that is predicted to be catastrophic in terms of its global impacts. The amount of fossil fuel in the tar sands alone is sufficient to raise global temperature by 0.4 degrees – so, obviously, we must leave most of it where it lies. Yet the Harper government intends to hugely increase oil extraction from the tar sands. Because of the manner in which it is extracted, it is one of the most carbon-intensive fuels on the planet – second only to coal. So, if we use this fuel at all, we should be using it frugally and extract maximum value from it while minimizing its impact on climate through carbon-capture.

Years ago, when I attended university, I learned in Economics 101 that it was imprudent to extract natural resources simply for export. It makes far more economic sense to convert natural resources into useful products and build the skills and technologies of local industries. Yet the policies of the Harper government are based on a gold rush mentality to extract crude diluted bitumen and ship it to the coasts for export without even further refining. This is no way to build a strong and stable economy in Canada.

I am also worried about the risk of leaks along the pipeline. Kinder Morgan's existing and ageing pipeline has a less than impressive record of spills. Since 1961, spills from the pipeline have amounted to over 40,000 barrels of oil. Of this, 5455 barrels have been spilled since the company was bought by Kinder Morgan in 2005 – a thirty-two fold increase over the amount spilled in the previous eight years (169 barrels) when the company operating the pipeline was Trans Mountain Pipelines. Diluted bitumen is far worse to clean up than conventional oil as it is a viscous less-refined product diluted with condensate from the gas industry. It contains carcinogenic chemicals. Rather than float, diluted bitumen has been shown to sink and contaminate waterways. It is inevitable that more spills will occur because most spills are due to human errors. In fact, it was human errors – and the most damaging one was made by Kinder Morgan staff – that were to blame for the huge spill in Burnaby in 2007 which cost millions of dollars in repairs and led to long term evacuation of some homes. Keep in mind that we live in an earthquake-prone area with predictions that we are long overdue for another big earthquake.

To export this diluted bitumen, Kinder Morgan intends to vastly expand their shipping facilities at the Westridge Terminal in Burnaby. Apparently, the proposed new terminal will stretch almost across the Inlet. As recently as 2003, we had only one oil tanker per month moving through Burrard Inlet. Now there are 60 per year. Kinder Morgan anticipates this will increase to at least 408 per year with the new pipeline. Frankly, I don't understand how so many tankers will be able to get under the Second Narrows Bridge and navigate through the tricky currents in the narrows on a tide with two daily lows and highs. This seems like a recipe for disaster. I simply can't imagine how horrible an oil spill would be in Burrard Inlet – or, for that matter, anywhere in the Salish Sea. With all that additional tanker traffic you can also count on local air quality getting a lot worse. I have little confidence in the ability of the federal government to adequately study such transport hazards or develop appropriate safety measures.

While I can foresee a number of problems regarding this pipeline project, I can't see any advantages. While jobs are touted as a benefit, the reality is there is only estimated to be 35 permanent jobs once the pipeline is built. Frankly, for Kinder Morgan to maximize their profits, they will want to create as few permanent jobs as possible. Expectations are that local gasoline prices will rise as we enter a competition with foreign markets for supply.

In conjunction with the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, the Burke Mountain Naturalists are co-hosting an evening of film and panel discussions regarding the hazards of the proposed pipelines across BC on Sunday evening, September 22 at the Evergreen Cultural Centre, 1205 Pinetree Way, Coquitlam. Doors will open at 6:30 pm with displays from various groups such as BROKE (Burnaby Residents Opposed to Kinder-Morgan Expansion). Tickets are \$10 or \$5 (seniors and students). The panelists will include Ben West from Forest Ethics and Christianne Wilhelmson from the Georgia Strait Alliance.