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**The Tar Sands Campaign Against the  
Overseas Export of Canadian Oil:  
Activism or Economic Sabotage?**



**Executive Summary, Introduction & Conclusion  
For the full report, contact the author at @FairQuestions**

**Vivian Krause  
January 12, 2018**

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**“From the very beginning, the campaign strategy was to land-lock the tar sands so their crude could not reach the international market where it could fetch a high price per barrel.”<sup>1</sup>**

**“The Coordination Center shall remain invisible to the outside and to the extent possible, staff will be ‘purchased’ from engaged organizations.”<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate Ethics International. <https://corpethics.org/the-tar-sands-campaign/>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Marx. 2008. The Tar Sands Campaign Strategy. Corporate Ethics International. <http://www.offsettingresistance.ca/TarSandsCoalition-StrategyPaper2008.pdf>

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On the basis of the evidence presented in this report, it is clear that The Northern Gateway pipeline and other proposed pipelines for the overseas export of oil from western Canada have been deliberately sabotaged as part of a multi-million dollar, U.S.-funded effort referred to as "The Tar Sands Campaign." This effort aims to stop the export of oil from western Canada by pipeline, tanker and by rail. The absence of a successful response to anti-pipeline activism and other factors have also contributed to pipeline project cancellations.

When the American funding behind The Tar Sands Campaign first came to light in 2010, the strategy of the U.S. funders was not entirely clear. But now it is. In the words of the original director of The Tar Sands Campaign, from the very beginning the strategy was to "land-lock" oil from western Canada within North America so that it could not reach overseas markets where it could attain a higher price per barrel.<sup>1</sup>

Launched in 2008 by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Tides Foundation ("Tides"), The Tar Sands Campaign aims to embarrass Canada, weaken the Alberta government and "reduce the attractiveness of the Alberta oil industry for the companies themselves, investors and financiers," the campaign's original strategy paper says.<sup>2</sup>

To fund The Tar Sands Campaign, Tides alone has made at least 400 payments totaling \$36 million (2009 – 2016) to more than 100 organizations in Canada, the U.S. and in Europe.

The Tar Sands Campaign aims to significantly reduce investor confidence in the Canadian oil industry and sway investment capital away from Canada by engineering "a steady drumbeat of bad press" to negatively stigmatize oil produced from the Canadian oil sands as the "poster child" of so-called "dirty fuel."

The Sands Campaign also aims to achieve a national carbon policy as a framework for curtailing the development of the Canadian oil sands. With the Alberta government's announcement that it will limit the industry's carbon emissions to 100 million MT, this objective has been achieved.

Activist organizations have been campaigning systematically against the Northern Gateway pipeline for more than a decade. This activism did not begin out of the blue. On the contrary, activism against Northern Gateway began in step with funding from American charitable foundations, particularly the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, who have a clearly stated goal of restricting the production and overseas export of oil and natural gas from Canada.

In 2008, under the banner of The Tar Sands Campaign, several U.S. funders markedly increased their financial and other support for activism against the oil industry in western Canada. This increase marked a continuation and intensification of activism for which U.S. funding had begun to escalate at least four years earlier.

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Most components of the campaign against the oil from western Canada can be traced back to 2004. That year, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation funded Tides Canada Foundation "to develop a strategic plan to address oil and gas development in British Columbia."<sup>3</sup> Since then, the Hewlett Foundation has granted US\$ 90 million to First Nations and environmental groups that are active in B.C and in the western U.S.

The flaw in The Tar Sands Campaign is that it provides slanted, selective information and does not tell the whole truth about oil from western Canada. While there is a grain of truth to some of the claims that are made, other claims are exaggerations and some are outright falsehoods. For example, the production of oil from the Alberta oil sands directly impacts less than 1% of Alberta's boreal forest, not an area the size of England or Florida, as the campaign has suggested. Furthermore, production of oil from the oil sands has a carbon footprint that is 10 – 20% higher than the average for U.S. crude oil, not 300 to 400% higher ("three to four times higher"), as the Pembina Institute and at least 20 other organizations funded as part of The Tar Sands Campaign have said.<sup>4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14</sup>

According to a funding document for the Tar Sands Campaign, its initial, annual budget was \$7 million and it had steering committees and working groups in both the U.S. and Canada.

The success of The Tar Sands Campaign hinges on its ability to get "earned media," publicity gained by getting into the news cycle. Earned media depends on the creativity and credibility of the activists and the invisibility of the money and the paid organizers behind them.

Using staff seconded from participating organizations, the paid organizers of this campaign keep a low profile, working behind the scenes. "The Coordination Center shall remain invisible to the outside and to the extent possible, staff will be 'purchased' from engaged organizations," the original strategy paper states.<sup>15</sup>

The various organizations involved in the Tar Sands Campaign appear to be acting independently but that is not how the campaign actually works. More than 60 groups receive behind-the-scenes support, including ghost-writing, from NetChange, a private company that is funded to "support and amplify" the Tar Sands Campaign.<sup>16</sup>

By pressuring regulators to delay, by intervening in regulatory review processes, by generating bad press and by taking legal action in conjunction with First Nations, The Tar Sands Campaign aims to get pipeline projects cancelled definitively or to stall them indefinitely. Among the strategies employed by The Tar Sands Campaign are legal action, putting land and marine access off-limits in the name of protecting wildlife habitat, fomenting First Nations opposition and leveraging their constitutional rights, lobbying and celebrity endorsement.

The Tar Sands Campaign is a small part of a very large, global effort to foster a major shift in investment capital away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy. This effort also seeks to improve energy efficiency and the energy security. All of these are worthy goals. However, the end goals of the broader effort do not justify the means that are employed to sabotage the Canadian oil industry based on claims that are exaggerations and in some instances, are outright falsehoods.

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## **Introduction**

Export pipelines such as Northern Gateway and Energy East are essential for getting full value on overseas markets for oil from western Canada and yet the construction of these pipelines has been systematically gridlocked due to fierce opposition that has been created and fomented by activist groups and the sources that fund them. Most of the individuals who have signed on-line petitions, written letters or attended protests against these pipelines are as Canadian as anyone but the large funders behind anti-pipeline activism are not.

The funding juggernaut behind anti-pipeline activism is The Tar Sands Campaign, a planning and co-ordination initiative launched in 2008 by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Tides Foundation ("Tides") and other charitable foundations, most of which are based in California.<sup>17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26</sup>

Back in 2010 when the U.S. funding behind the Tar Sands Campaign first came to light, little information about this campaign was publicly available. In fact, The Tar Sands Campaign was only noticed initially because Tides reported in its U.S. tax return for 2009 that it had made payments to more than 30 organizations under the heading "Tar Sands Campaign." Those three little words, "Tar Sands Campaign," were the only mention of this campaign that was found on-line when its funding was first exposed in The Financial Post in October of 2010.<sup>27</sup>

Over the years, the goals and the thinking behind the Tar Sands Campaign has been laid bare in two documents that have become available on-line: 1) A power point presentation, and 2) A detailed, 17-page strategy paper. Both documents were written by Michael Marx. At the time, Marx was the executive director of Corporate Ethics International ("CorpEthics"), then the lead organization in the Tar Sands Campaign.<sup>28</sup> This report draws heavily on the two documents by Michael Marx and other on-line information including several proposals submitted to the Conservation Alliance by environmental groups and the workbook for a workshop for activists who campaign against pipelines.<sup>29</sup>

This report also presents funding information from an extensive analysis of the U.S. tax returns of the U.S. foundations that fund the Tar Sands Campaign. Information is also presented from a series of covering letters on payments made by Tides.

Part One of this report provides an overview of the goals, budget, structure and strategies of the Tar Sands Campaign. This section concludes with a discussion of why The Tar Sands Campaign is unacceptable.

Part Two of this report offers a detailed analysis of more than 400 payments made by The Tides Foundation in support of The Tar Sands Campaign.

Part Three offers a historical overview of environmental programs funded by one of the major funders of The Tar Sands Campaign, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation.



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## **What Is The Tar Sands Campaign?**

In the words of Michael Marx, one of the original architects of the Tar Sands Campaign, this effort is a “large, complex campaign with a number of different entities: corporate, governmental, community, educational and non-governmental.”<sup>30</sup>

Across Canada, coast to coast to coast, all of the major environmental organizations that campaign systematically against pipelines and oil tanker traffic, have been partially funded as part of The Tar Sands Campaign. Opposition to Northern Gateway, Energy East, the reversal of Line 9, Kinder Morgan’s TransMountain pipeline and pressure for The Fuel Quality Directive in Europe have all been funded as part of this campaign.

Forest Ethics has been funded to lead the “Tanker Free West Coast Coalition” and the New York-based Natural Resources Defense Council has been funded to run the “Tar Sands Free East Coast Coalition.” To a lesser extent, efforts to stop the MacKenzie gas pipeline were also supported by the same environmental groups and U.S. funders,

### **“Demarketing”**

The Tar Sands Campaign is a “demarketing” campaign. Demarketing is the opposite of marketing. Whereas marketing aims to increase demand, demarketing aims to reduce it. Demarketing is done by instilling fear, uncertainty and doubt, not only in the minds of consumers, the broader public, policy makers and investors but most insidiously, within the mind of industry itself.

A classic example of demarketing is the series of advertisements that Apple once ran against Microsoft. Depicting PC as geeky and dysfunctional, these ads helped to position Mac as cool and state-of-the-art.

Another case of demarketing via activism is the campaign against farmed salmon. Positioning farmed fish as unsafe and unsustainable helps to facilitate product differentiation and branding of wild fish as safe and sustainable. By exaggerating the environmental impacts of aquaculture, environmental activism has swayed market share towards commercial fisheries, thereby mitigating the market and trade impacts that commercial fisheries were suffering due to fierce competition from aquaculture.

Using some of the same strategies that were ranged against salmon farming, and with support from the same group of U.S. funders, activists are now trying to sell another over-simplified, false dichotomy: “clean energy” vs. “dirty energy.”

When it comes to Alberta oil, demarketing is precisely what the Tar Sands Campaign has been funded to do by The Rockefeller Brothers Fund and other U.S. funders.

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## **Funds From The Rockefeller Brothers Fund for “Demarketing” Canadian Oil**

Since 2009, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, based in New York, has paid at least US\$2.7 million towards the demarketing of Alberta oil, according to its tax returns and web-site. In 2007, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) paid Corporate Ethics International (CEI) \$250,000 *"to coordinate the initial steps of a markets campaign to stem demand for tar sands derived fuels in the United States."*<sup>31</sup> That's demarketing.

The initial grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund was followed by \$200,000 the next year and \$500,000 the year after that.<sup>32,33,34</sup> Since 2011, RBF has continued to fund the demarketing of Alberta oil through the New Venture Fund, not Corporate Ethics International. RBF granted at least \$1.7 million to New Venture under the heading "Fossil Fuel Reduction Project," another name for the Tar Sands Campaign.<sup>35,36,37,38,39,40</sup>

In 2012, RBF paid New Venture \$250,000 *"to support the campaign to cap tar sands production in Alberta, Canada and to reduce demand for tar sands derived fuels in the United States."* However, shortly after this grant was reported in The Financial Post, those telling words were quietly removed from the website of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.<sup>41</sup>

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund also removed the details of a grant to Tides Canada for \$50,000. Initially, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's web-site reported that it funded Tides Canada *"to create a web-site, "Oil Sands Tourism, which works to educate American tourists and tour operators about the damage being done to Alberta by the unsustainable extraction of tar sands, and by doing so, to increase pressure on Alberta policymakers to shift development plans onto a more sustainable track."* Those words were removed after that grant was reported in The Financial Post.<sup>42</sup> The web-site, RETHINK ALBERTA, which was produced with funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, has also since been removed - but not before it was used to generate substantial bad press, both in Canada and abroad.

## **Goals of The Tar Sands Campaign**

The Tar Sands Campaign seeks nothing short of stopping altogether the growth of the Alberta oil industry, aiming "to constrain the growth of tar sands production by increasing the perception of financial risks by potential investors and by choking off the necessary infrastructure (inputs and outputs) of the tar sands," the campaign's original strategy states. It says, "We will accomplish this by raising the visibility of the negatives associated with tar sands; initiating legal challenges in order to force government and corporate decision-makers to take steps that raise the costs of production and block delivery infrastructure; and by generating support for federal and state legislation that pre-empts future demand for tar sands oil."

The long-term goal of this campaign is to accelerate the shift in Canada and the U.S. toward cleaner energy and lower energy consumption. "We are forcing investors and oil companies to embrace a new energy paradigm," the strategy says.

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## **U.S. Funding in Canada: What Does It Mean?**

Since it first came to light that there is a common source of U.S. funding behind all or nearly all of the environmental and First Nations groups that campaign in concert against pipelines, tanker traffic and the expansion of the Alberta oil sands industry, there have been various interpretations of what this means.

One interpretation is that the environmental groups and First Nations who participate in this campaign are 'bought and paid for.' The fact is, however, that even without U.S. funding, most environmental groups would have been opposed to fossil fuel development. In fact, some Canadian organizations have a history of activism against oil that precedes The Tar Sands Campaign. As such, the view that environmental groups have been 'bought' by their U.S. funders does not fit the facts.

At the other end of the spectrum is the view that environmental groups call the shots with their funders and that the source of funding doesn't matter. Again, this view doesn't fit the facts. The U.S. donors do have an agenda. The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, for example, has outlined its agenda in a written, publicly available strategy paper, posted at its website. Furthermore, most of the U.S. funders of The Tar Sands Campaign do not accept unsolicited proposals. What this means is that these funders have an agenda and that they seek organizations to implement their strategy and reach their goals. Funders who operate in this way are as much a part of The Tar Sands Campaign as the groups that protest or launch legal action.

## **Why The Tar Sands Campaign is Unacceptable**

According to its original strategy paper, the ultimate goal of The Tar Sands Campaign is to foster a paradigm shift towards renewable energy. That's a worthy goal. The problem with the Tar Sands Campaign is that one of the means to achieve this goal is by "demarketing Alberta oil on the basis of claims that are only partially true, or in some cases, are flagrantly untrue. The end does not justify the means.

Year after year, some of the information that is provided by The Tar Sands Campaign has been inaccurate, incomplete or outright false, unfairly contributing to bad press and negative public opinion about Alberta oil. This is what one expects from a hard-hitting campaign but it is unethical and is not what charitable foundations and registered charities are permitted to do. Given that the goal of the Tar Sands Campaign is to "negatively brand" Alberta oil, it is easy to see why The Tar Sands Campaign only disseminates negative information - but that doesn't make it right.

If there were sound reasons for demarketing Alberta oil, it would make sense to do so. The problem is, much of the rationale that is given for the demarketing of Alberta oil, is flawed by inaccuracy and exaggeration. This is no surprise. If The Tar Sands Campaign would provide accurate and comprehensive information about the oil sands industry, there would not be a sound case for the campaign.

By its own admission, the Tar Sands Campaign isn't tackling Alberta oil because it is the biggest fossil fuel problem in the world. Indeed, The Tar Sands Campaign strategy acknowledges that transportation accounts for only 25% of global carbon

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emissions, that the U.S. is responsible for only 25% of that, and that Canada accounts for only one quarter of U.S. oil consumption. And yet, ignoring all that, The Tar Sands Campaign aims to make Alberta oil its "poster child," the original strategy says. The Tar Sands Campaign claims that an area the size of Florida has been designated as a "sacrifice zone" for oilsands development and that production of Alberta oil generates three to four times the carbon emissions of regular crude and requires four barrels of water for every barrel of oil produced. If either of these claims were true, it would make sense to campaign against Alberta oil. The truth is, however, all of these statements are exaggerations to the point of being false.

The oil sands underlie an area that is 142,200 km<sup>2</sup> in size but the area where surface mining is taking place is less than 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>43</sup> That's equivalent to less than 1% of Alberta's boreal forest. Furthermore, according to law, the land must be restored. But none of that gets mentioned by the Tar Sands Campaign. Instead, what we have been hearing is that the oil industry is destroying an area the size of England or Florida. Again, the truth is something entirely different. The truth is that the entire Alberta oil sands industry operates in area that is only 0.5% the size of Florida.

The production of oil sands crude is associated with carbon emissions that are roughly 10% to 20% higher than the average U.S. crude, not three or four times higher, as The Tar Sands Campaign claims, incorrectly.<sup>44</sup> Some Alberta crude actually has a smaller carbon footprint than oil produced in California.<sup>45</sup> And yet, activists involved with The Tar Sands Campaign refer to Alberta oil as "the dirtiest oil in the world."<sup>46</sup> Even President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have inaccurately referred to Alberta oil as the "dirtiest."

Alberta oil production accounts for less than one percent of global carbon emissions but that's not what we hear from the Tar Sands Campaign. What we hear is that the Alberta oil sands are "the biggest carbon bomb on the planet." The fact is, of the top 100 carbon emitters in the U.S. and Canada, only two are in Alberta.<sup>47,48</sup>

Given that The Tar Sands Campaign intends to demarket Alberta oil and deter investment, it is easy to see why this campaign does not draw attention to the fact that the production of oil from the Alberta oilsands accounts for only a tiny slice of global carbon emissions - but that is the truth. Even if the Alberta oil industry was to shut down completely, it wouldn't change global carbon emissions by much. Oil would simply be supplied from another country. However, since the campaign aims to stigmatize Alberta oil, telling the whole truth would be counter-productive.

The Tar Sands Campaign promotes the idea that oil sands production is causing cancer in First Nations communities.<sup>49</sup> "Poisonous chemicals that cause cancer -- that's the tar sands, and that's #KeystoneXL," tweeted the Sierra Club.<sup>50</sup> "Deaths from cancer have been happening for years owing to tar sands, knowingly ignored by oil companies," tweeted the U.K. campaign.<sup>51</sup> "The tar sands cause cancer and our Natural Resources Minister Greg Rickford is helping corporations profit from this injustice!" tweeted 350.org.<sup>52</sup> The fact is, these opinions are unsubstantiated. The Royal Society of Canada, having conducted a comprehensive review of available evidence, concluded, "there is currently no credible evidence of environmental contaminant exposures from oil sands reaching Fort Chipewyan residents at levels expected to cause elevated human cancer rates."<sup>53</sup>

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Environmental groups routinely use ugly images of oil sands operations that use open pit mining. And yet, those operations now account for less than half of Alberta's oil production. More than half of Alberta oil now comes from operations that use steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) which involves no open pit mining and virtually no tailing ponds. But environmental groups don't use aerial images of SAGD operations - even though they account for more than half of Alberta's production.

## **Conclusion**

By its own admission, The Tar Sands Campaign isn't about optimizing pipeline proposals nor is it about developing the Alberta oil sands in a responsible way. This campaign is about getting pipeline projects scrapped and ending the growth of the Canadian oil sands industry altogether.

The demands of the Tar Sands Campaign cannot be met by anything short of cancelling the proposed pipelines and other infrastructure or delaying them indefinitely. Modifying pipeline proposals to appease the activists who are funded as a part of the Tar Sands Campaign is a fool's errand because it ignores the fundamental reality of the campaign's longstanding goal.

The Tar Sands Campaign is not traditional, 20<sup>th</sup> century activism that tended to dissipate once legitimate issues are resolved. The Tar Sands Campaign is activism that is funded as part of the "context setting" for the creation and marketing of a new, multi-billion dollar renewable energy industry, and more broadly, for furthering U.S. energy independence and energy security by decreasing dependency on foreign oil. As long as the "context setting" for this broad-based initiative is needed, activism will also be needed - and funded - because it is fundamental to the success of the broader strategy.

As things stand, the development of market forces for "clean energy" is contingent upon fear of catastrophic climate change due to use of fossil fuels. As long as the positioning and marketing of "clean energy" is hinged upon the depositioning and demarketing of fossil fuels, it should be expected that Alberta oil will continue to be the whipping boy, the punching bag of this campaign. It follows that to bring the demarketing of Alberta oil to an end will require a re-orientation of the larger strategy for how to foster energy security for North America and develop renewable energy in a sound manner – without the need to demarket Alberta oil as part of the "context setting."

In conclusion, broadly speaking, bringing The Tar Sands Campaign to an end requires a shift towards seeking environmental solutions for environmental problems and market solutions for market problems. Environmental risks and impacts must not be exaggerated at the service of a marketing or a "demarketing" campaign. The true environmental risks and impacts of the oil industry must be addressed, not trivialized and ignored by industry, nor exaggerated to sabotage a legitimate industry that is of great economic importance to Canada and to the world.



*"I just want to apologize beforehand  
if you miss."*

Image credit: P.C. Vey, The New Yorker.

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- <sup>28</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/82144578/Tar-Sands-Presentation-July-2008>
- <sup>29</sup> The power point presentation was co-written with Steven Northrop, the Environment Program Director at The Rockefeller Brothers Fund.<sup>29</sup> The authenticity of these documents has never been contested so it is assumed that they were produced as part of The Tar Sands Campaign.
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- <sup>41</sup> [www.rethinkalberta.com](http://www.rethinkalberta.com). This web-site was registered to the New Venture Fund and was on-line between and July 17, 2010 and July 3, 2014.
- <sup>42</sup> [http://fairquestions.typepad.com/rethink\\_campaigns/2011/02/usa-foundations-re-wrote-info.html](http://fairquestions.typepad.com/rethink_campaigns/2011/02/usa-foundations-re-wrote-info.html)
- <sup>43</sup> <http://www.oilsandstoday.ca/topics/RestorLand/Pages/default.aspx>
- <sup>44</sup> <http://www.oilsandstoday.ca/topics/ghgemissions/Pages/default.aspx>
- <sup>45</sup> <http://www.megenergy.com/corporate-responsibility/environment/air>
- <sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/search?q=Dirtyest%20%40dirtyoilsands&src=typd&f=realtime>

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.ec.gc.ca/ges-ghg/donnees-data/index.cfm?do=results&lang=en&year=2013&StartRow=451>

<sup>48</sup> <http://ghgdata.epa.gov/ghgp/main.do>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/controversial-uk-campaign-attacks-canadian-oil-mines-1306171.htm>

<sup>50</sup> <https://twitter.com/sierraclub/status/571823459526967296>

<sup>51</sup> <https://twitter.com/PlatformLondon/status/588393390884179968>

<sup>52</sup> <https://twitter.com/350Canada/status/603951322962894848>

<sup>53</sup> The Royal Society of Canada. 2013. Environmental and Health Impacts of Canada's Oil Sands Industry. <https://rsc-src.ca/en/expert-panels/rsc-reports/environmental-and-health-impacts-canadas-oil-sands-industry>