

INTERVIEW WITH MAGDA STOCZKIEWICZ, DIRECTOR, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH EUROPE

Tar sands: Most climate-hostile transport fuel

By Dafydd ab Iago

Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE) has recently published a report underlining the dangers to the EU's energy and climate strategy posed by tar sands. According to FoEE Director Magda Stoczkiewicz, the EU must take into account the real carbon footprint of fossil fuels from different sources, de-incentivising those from unconventional oil and promoting cleaner forms of fuel.

What is wrong with tar sands?

Put simply, tar sands are the source of the most climate-hostile transport fuel in commercial production today. The environmental and social consequences of tar sand development are severe – air and water pollution, the destruction of pristine boreal forests and peatland, land-use change, catastrophic biodiversity loss and devastating impacts on indigenous communities. The greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the conversion of tar sands into fuel is on average three to five times higher than for conventional oil.

Why are emissions so high?

The high emissions reflect the vast amount of energy required to extract and process tar sands into oil. Emissions from Canadian tar sands are set to grow to between 127 and 140 million tonnes by 2020, exceeding the current emissions of Belgium. The production of tar sand oil is also very resource intensive – about two thousand kilograms of tar sands must be processed to produce one barrel of oil, with each barrel requiring up to 800 litres of water during the process. This puts incredible pressure on vital land and water resources, and on the communities that rely upon them. With operations in Canada alone soon to cover over 140,000 square kilometres – an area larger than England – land reclamation becomes a serious concern.

Why is this issue becoming more pressing?

Production of oil from tar sands is no longer limited to Canada. Our recent report shows that oil companies are investing in the development of tar sands around the

world. New deposits of tar sands and other unconventional oil have been discovered, or are already being exploited, in countries such as Venezuela, Madagascar, Congo-Brazzaville, Russia, Jordan, Nigeria and Angola. Time is critical since unconventional oil resources are about to go global.



Stoczkiewicz: "The EU needs to set a standard"

The current discussions around the framework of the Fuel Quality Directive (FQD) offers the EU an opportunity to set global standards and incentivise less carbon-intensive technologies.

What do you feel the EU should be doing?

The EU needs to set a standard – it needs to show it's serious about tackling climate change, and it needs to take effective policy steps to prevent the 're-carbonisation' of our economy. The EU proposal for limiting the GHG emissions of transport fuels – Article 7a of the FQD – sets a legally binding 6% reduction target (10% overall, including 4% of voluntary reduction). However, the current proposal risks undermining the purpose of this legislation – it does not differentiate between oil products depending on their GHG emissions, treating those from high carbon sources, such as tar sands, equally to those from less carbon intensive production technologies.

The EU also needs to ensure that the European Investment Bank and member states' export credit agencies withhold any public support for projects related to tar sands and discourage any new investment in energy sources from heavy oil, tar sands or oil shale. It needs to send a clear signal that investors should invest in renewables.

Has the European Parliament taken a stand on the issue?

The European Parliament is increasingly aware of the problems surrounding tar sands. On 5 May, the Parliament voted a resolution expressing its "concern about the impact of the extraction of oil sand on the global environment due to the high level of CO₂ emissions during its production process and the threat it poses for local biodiversity". Based on the Commission's proposal on the FQD implementation of Article 7a, comitology may involve Parliament at certain stages of the process. This would give Parliament the right to reflect the need for differentiation based on GHG emissions of production technologies.

Will action against tar sands not endanger efforts to improve EU security of supply?

On the contrary, the 'Europe 2020' strategy highlights the Union's current dependence on imported fossil fuels as a major threat to economic security. 'Business as usual' projections show fossil fuels will remain the dominant energy source for the period 2007 to 2030. In Europe, where imports are predicted to make up 93% of oil and 84% of gas supply by 2030, the economic and energy security implications of such a continuously rising import bill are clear. Reducing Europe's structural dependence on increasingly costly fossil fuels is essential for our future energy security. Increasing investment in even more expensive marginal sources of conventional oil or developing even more carbon intensive 'unconventional' sources, such as tar sands, will only exacerbate the problem. ■

The report is available at
www.foeeurope.org/corporates/pdf/Tar_Sand_Final_May10.pdf