

# Tar sands

*one of the dirtiest and most environmentally destructive fossil fuels*

In the Canyonlands of southeastern Utah, industrialists in search of mineral riches are engaged in a massive land-grab.

One of the last vast wild places in the lower 48, Canyonlands is now teetering on a precipice of rampant industrial development. Home to the most stunning desert landscapes in the world, the Greater Canyonlands Region has become the target of industrialists, who threaten to turn our treasured parks into islands, our canyons into roaring hydrocarbon highways, and our rivers into endangered arteries among vast swaths of oil and gas development, uranium and potash mining and tar sands development.<sup>1</sup>

## The ugly reality of oil from tar sands

Tar sand is a naturally occurring asphalt from which a low-grade oil can be extracted. Obtaining useful fuel from tar sands, however, requires tremendous amounts of energy, water, and chemicals, making this fossil fuel a large contributor to climate change, as well as to water and air pollution. Mining tar sand is environmentally destructive on a vast scale, involving huge open-pit strip mines, creating massive amounts of debris that must be moved elsewhere, resulting in landscape-scale ecological destruction and water and air pollution on a scale that defies imagination. In Canada, tar sands mining and processing has destroyed an area the size of Florida and polluted rivers and groundwater with substances causing cancer, birth defects, and mutations.



<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Our Canyon Lands <http://www.ourcanyonlands.org/#intro>

Now the fossil fuel industry wants to do this in the Canyonlands of eastern Utah, despoiling on a grand scale an area of immense beauty and wildness, and damaging the watersheds and waters of three vital rivers, the Green, White and Colorado. These high canyons are head water streams for rivers which supply over 35 million people with drinking water.

The initial project is by a Canadian company, US Oil Sands, that has acquired leases to strip mine tar sands from nearly 6,000 acres on the Tavaputs Plateau, with plans to expand mining on 32,000 acres. The Tavaputs Plateau – an area of high elevation forests of aspens, Douglas Fir, Ponderosa, and scrub oak – is world renown for quality back country and big game hunting. In this landscape, US Oil Sands has established a pilot project and is excavating test pits, building roads, installing machinery and infrastructure, with plans to start commercially producing fuel from tar sands in 2015. This project has received approval from state regulators in spite of negative environmental, social, and cultural impacts.

If the fossil fuel industry prevails, future tar sands mining could expand to hundreds of thousands of acres, affecting a major portion of Utah's Canyonlands. In Grand County alone, 42% of public lands are currently leased for O&G development, including 86% of SITLA lands<sup>2</sup> and 33% of BLM/USFS.<sup>3</sup>

Utah's Canyonlands are one of a kind. Their soaring peaks, deep canyons, otherworldly hoodoos and swift rivers have captured the imagination of millions of visitors from all over the world. Only the smallest core at the heart of this remarkable country is protected as Canyonlands National Park. The 1.8 million acres of outstanding public land around that core are gravely threatened.

Public awareness and opposition to tar sands mining is growing – but the fossil fuel industry is pressing ahead, using its full force to gain political and official approval, and to squelch opposition.

A number of local and state organizations are fighting tar sands mining. Efforts to challenge tar sands mining on environmental and social grounds have been frustrated by strong support for tar sand mining at the state level. In response, one of the organizations, Utah Tar Sands Resistance, has drawn attention to tar sands through several direct actions.

In July 2013, dozens of people peacefully disrupted road construction and stopped operations at the US Oil Sands, and members of indigenous tribes from the Four Corners region held a water ceremony inside the mine site. In July 2014, about 80 protesters swarmed a fenced equipment yard in pre-dawn hours and raised a banner reading “U are Trespassing on Ute Land.” Several protesters locked their bodies to construction equipment and blocked entrance to the yard. After some protesters were extracted and arrested, a second wave of protesters sat in the road, blocking police vehicles from leaving. Twenty-one people were arrested that day, seven of whom were charged with felonies. In January 2015, the heavy-handed a felony charges were eliminated and reduced during plea negotiations. Undaunted, the protesters have pledged to continue to fight.

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2 Lands managed by the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration. SITLA was created by the Utah legislature in 1995. See <http://trustlands.utah.gov/our-agency/what-are-trust-lands/>

3 See *Current Oil and Gas Lease in Grand and San Juan Counties* <http://canyoncountryrisingtide.org/>



***We all need to join the fight against tar sands development, to save the Canyonlands, to protect human health, to avoid further air & water pollution, and to prevent this dirtiest fossil fuel from accelerating the climate crisis.***

### Information and organizations

*Tar Sands and Oil Shale On The Colorado Plateau: A Factsheet*

<https://moabcanyoncountryrisingtide.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/tarsandsfactsheet.pdf>

*Last Rush for the Wild West*

<http://www.lastrushforthewildwest.com/>

A film exposing how impending tar sands and oil shale mining would destroy pristine landscapes in Utah and put the already imperiled Colorado River watershed at risk.

*This Land Was Your Land* - by Christopher Ketcham, in The American Prospect

<http://prospect.org/article/land-was-your-land>

Utah Tar Sands Resistance

<http://www.tarsandsresist.org/>

“We have the moral imperative, as residents who rely on the air, water, and land of this region, to protect these resources when our government refuses to serve as steward of them on behalf of the people. We believe we must protect this land and these resources for future generations. SITLA is entrusted with managing this land for the long-term benefit of the public schools, but instead is sacrificing it for short-term gains, which stands in diametrical opposition to its mission. Over the past several years, we and various other organizations have pursued legal solutions such as a challenge to U.S. Oil Sands’ wastewater dumping permit, discussions with SITLA, and public rallies, to no avail. Our government’s insistence on looking the other way as tar sands strip mining in Utah jeopardizes our future led us to take civil disobedience in order to

persuade our government to protect human rights over corporate profits. Only after serious deliberation did we choose to jeopardize our own liberty by using the age-old tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience for the sake of our future and all the generations to come.”

#### Canyon Country Rising Tide

[www.CanyonCountryRisingTide.org](http://www.CanyonCountryRisingTide.org)

“Canyon Country Rising Tide is a chapter of the movement Rising Tide, based out of Moab, and work now to stop tar sands and oil shale development in Grand and Uintah Counties. While we support the legal battles to protect our land, we also acknowledge that while lawsuits sit in court, companies are actively building infrastructure and making huge scale strip mining operations a reality. We are dedicated to using People Power to stop this out-of-control corporate and state power. We use creative, strategic, non-violent direct action to engage, empower, and educate the people of rural Utah and Colorado to rise up and protect and defend our home and planet.”

#### Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

<http://suwa.org/>

“working full-time to defend America’s redrock wilderness from oil and gas development, unnecessary road construction, rampant off-road vehicle use, and other threats to Utah’s wilderness-quality lands.”

#### Our Canyon Lands

<http://www.ourcanyonlands.org/#intro>

A source of visual media about the Greater Canyonlands Region, with the intent of protecting the 1.8 million acres of critical watershed surrounding and bordering the existing park, including a short documentary that explores the Greater Canyonlands Region and the threats that exist in this pristine Western landscape.

“In Southeastern Utah, one of the last vast wild places in the lower 48 sits teetering on a precipice of rampant industrial development. Home to the most stunning desert landscapes in the world, the Greater Canyonlands Region has become the playground of adventurous souls who love and appreciate the wonder of wild places. It has also become the target of industrialists, who threaten to turn our treasured parks into islands, our canyons into roaring hydrocarbon highways and our rivers into endangered arteries among vast swaths of oil and gas development, uranium and potash mining and, potentially, tar sands development bordering Canyonlands National Park. The 1.8 million acres of public lands surrounding Canyonlands National Park in southern Utah is one of the largest remaining wild roadless areas in the lower 48 states. Its breathtaking beauty, spectacular geology and 12,000 year record of human history are both globally significant and irreplaceable. These lands are under threat from oil and gas development, potash, uranium and tar sands mining, and irresponsible off-road vehicle use.”

#### Grand Canyon Trust

<http://www.grandcanyontrust.org/>

petition to to Protect Greater Canyonlands

<http://grandcanyontrust.nonprofitsoapbox.com/protectgreatercanyonlands>