

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Obama's big call

President of the US Barack Obama is about to make a judgment call that will have world-changing consequences. And I fear he's going to get it wrong.

He has to decide whether to approve or reject the 3,000km Keystone XL pipeline, which would carry some of the most carbon-rich oil on the planet from Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the coast of Texas.

The oil comes from 'tar sands' – a sludge-like substance that is the dirtiest of the dirty sources of fuel. Tar sands extraction involves strip-mining huge tracts of pristine forest (an area the size of Florida) and spitting out vast quantities of toxic water.

Worse still, according to Friends of the Earth, replacing crude oil with tar sands oil would increase greenhouse gas emissions by the equivalent of adding six million cars to US roads. Meanwhile, the pipeline itself would bisect the country, creating a risk of oil spills.

Approval of the pipeline would be a disaster. Not only that, America can meet its energy needs without it.

But Obama is under pressure from the Canadian government, which has a terrible environmental record, to give the project the green light, as well as from TransCanada, the company behind it. Then there are

his Republican opponents, who are notoriously anti-environment and anti-science.

Alberta's tar sands have at least one trillion barrels in known reserves, roughly the equivalent of all the conventional oil burned by humans since the mid-19th century. So it's not surprising that a report just published by the US government provides a deeply flawed analysis of the environmental consequences of the pipeline and raises few objections.



Tar sands extraction: it ain't pretty.

“*Tar sands extraction involves strip-mining tracts of forest and spitting out toxic water.*”

This is Obama's big opportunity. He can either unleash the continent's biggest carbon bomb or he can send a strong message to the world that he is serious about cutting greenhouse emissions. He's due to make the decision later this year.

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