



TAR SANDS SHOWDOWN – SOCIAL DAMAGE

- In Fort McMurray, the population is growing at a rate of 8 percent per year, reaching more than 80,000 in 2008, but this northern Alberta frontier town only has the infrastructure to handle a population of little more than 10,000.
- Basic municipal services such as garbage pickup, policing and fire protection are grossly overloaded. The City's outspoken mayor has been lobbying the Alberta government for years to put some money towards addressing the problems.
- The narrow Highway 63, better known as the "highway to hell," used by workers fleeing to Edmonton on weekends, is in desperate need of repair and upgrading. It is two lane highway, with one of the highest rates of traffic in Alberta. There are accidents on this dangerous road on a regular basis.
- The town's housing crisis is perhaps the most pressing problem. It's not uncommon to find eight or ten people sharing an apartment; others sleep in their trucks. Workers pitch tents along the Athabasca River, or rent garages or trailers. The homeless population is much too high for the city to handle.
- Under these conditions, the crime rate has soared. Assaults in Fort McMurray are reportedly 89 percent higher than in the rest of Alberta. Arrests for drug-related offences are 215 percent higher, and arrests for impaired driving 117 percent higher.
- The city is rife with drug-use, gambling and prostitution. Since a majority of tar sands employees are young, male, and coming from elsewhere in the country, the streets and the Boomtown Casino provide a space to blowoff steam on their few days off.
- So many workers are coming from out East to work in the Tar Sands, there are now direct flights between Fort McMurray and St. Johns.
- Meanwhile, the tar sands have caused an outbreak of social conflicts brewing amongst different constituencies, including workers, farmers and First Nation peoples. In the pro-business climate of Alberta, labour unions have to constantly watch their backs. Since the tar sands industry generates thousands of high-paying jobs for skilled and semi-skilled workers, the companies are always looking for ways to cut their costs by keeping wages down.
- One way has been to hire non-union workers and/or cheap foreign labour. The Klein government enabled Canadian Natural Resources Ltd., to employ non-union workers for its Horizon Project in 2005. Using an obscure clause in the Alberta Labour Relations Code, the cabinet granted CNRL "special status" to hire non-union labour at much lower wages.
- The distribution of wealth from the tar sands oil boom throughout Alberta is extremely skewed. According to an Environics poll conducted in March 2007, half of Albertans either felt worse off (17 percent) or about the same (34 percent) as a result of the boom. In the June 2007 Parkland report, The Spoils of the Boom, Diana Gibson found that "the benefits of the boom are disproportionately going to high income Albertans, most notably the top income bracket." In other words, "Alberta's wealth is trickling up not down." While middle-income Albertans have seen small increases in their incomes, this is not really due to the boom but because they have been working more hours to maintain their standard of living.

For more information, or to get involved visit <http://www.tarsandswatch.org>

<http://www.oilsandstruth.org>, <http://www.ienearth.org>, <http://www.dominionpaper.org/tarsands>

Excerpt from author Tony Clarke's Book "Tar Sands Showdown"



...You would think that in Fort McMurray, the hub of the tar sands boom, people would be humming all the way to the bank. After all, with several hundred billion barrels of oil in the region and a rapidly growing industry generating the highest paying jobs to be found anywhere on the continent, this boom could last as long as eighty to a hundred years. Here, tar sands workers eat at restaurants called "Fuel," drink at bars called "Oil Can," and gamble their wages away at casinos called "Boom Town." But, while McMurray is awash in cash, or McMurray, as it's now often called, it is also beleaguered by a litany of social problems.

Fort McMurray's population is growing at a rate of 8 percent per year, reaching more than 80,000 in 2008, making it the province's third largest city after Calgary and Edmonton, but this northern Alberta frontier town only has the infrastructure to handle a population of little more than 10,000. Basic municipal services such as garbage pickup, policing and fire protection are grossly overloaded. After the spring thaw the bare streets are littered with garbage, the schools are overcrowded and there is a pressing need for a new water treatment facility. Land for new housing is at a premium, despite the abundance of adjacent Crown land, and housing prices have been going through the roof. And then there's the narrow Highway 63, better known as the "highway to hell," used by workers fleeing to Edmonton on weekends, which is in desperate need of repair and upgrading.

The town's housing crisis is perhaps the most pressing problem. It's not uncommon to find eight or ten people sharing an apartment; others sleep in their trucks. Workers pitch tents along the Athabasca River, or rent garages or trailers. Hundreds of homeless men and women, many of them on drugs, "walk the streets like zombies." Under these conditions, the crime rate has soared. Assaults in Fort McMurray are reportedly 89 percent higher than in the rest of Alberta. Arrests for drug-related offences are 215 percent higher, and arrests for impaired driving 117 percent higher than those recorded elsewhere in the province. Every week, an estimated 6.5 million dollars' worth of crack cocaine makes its way up the highway to hell. The town's detox centres are overloaded, suicide counselling is all but maxed out and there is a crying need for more doctors.

The distribution of wealth from the tar sands oil boom throughout Alberta is similarly skewed. According to an Environics poll conducted in March 2007, half of Albertans either felt worse off (17 percent) or about the same (34 percent) as a result of the boom. The Parkland Institute found these poll results surprising given the incredible wealth generated by the boom, and decided to probe further. In the June 2007 Parkland report, *The Spoils of the Boom*, Diana Gibson found that "the benefits of the boom are disproportionately going to high income Albertans, most notably the top income bracket." In other words, "Alberta's wealth is trickling up not down." Although middle-income Albertans have seen small increases in their incomes, this is not really due to the boom but because they have been working more hours to maintain their standard of living. Moreover, housing prices and rents have been skyrocketing. Between January 2006 and June 2007 new home prices increased by 65 percent in Calgary, while in Edmonton the average selling price for a condo or single family home jumped 52 percent...