

Author fills the room for oil sands talk

By Alan Mattson The Eagle June 17, 2009

It can be tough to motivate Albertans to sit through a talk on the oil sands — especially when you're competing against a rainy Friday night and game seven of the Stanley Cup Final.

But when Andrew Nikiforuk came to Cochrane on June 12, he spoke to a full house about the environmental, economic and political destruction he sees as a direct result of oil sands development.

"As an Albertan, I'm disturbed by how this project has really hijacked the social and political life of Alberta, and it has done so without any provincial discussion," Nikiforuk said at St. Andrew's United Church.

Based on his new book *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, Nikiforuk has given his illuminating two-hour talk to communities across Alberta. The AI Gore of bitumen? Maybe not, but people are listening.

"It's incredible. It's scary. Lots of Albertans are not aware of what's going on," said attendee Jennifer Janzen. "You can't talk badly about the oil sands because it's our economy."

The talk is wide-ranging (and impossible to condense into a news story): irreversible environmental destruction, the reckless squandering of resource wealth, unaccountable politicians, international contempt from environmentalists, and of course, the inevitable depletion of all fossil fuels, leading to Alberta's economic devastation.

Canada is now the largest supplier of oil to the United States, and Alberta's oil sands are the biggest reserves left. This means pressure has built from all sides to quickly develop the resource, without any kind of "national discussion" on the impact.

"You cannot become the number one oil supplier to the world's mightiest empire and not have that change your economy, and your politics and the character of your country," Nikiforuk said.

According to Nikiforuk, "oil has peaked," meaning 50 per cent of the world's supply has been depleted, leaving the world's petroleum-addicted nations to fight over what remains.

"It doesn't mean the end of oil, it just means the cheap stuff is gone. And that's why we saw prices hit \$150 (per barrel last summer), that's why we've seen this entire financial collapse, and that's why we will see nothing but unpredictability in financial markets and oil markets for the rest of our lives."

Nikiforuk believes that once a resource makes up more than 20 per cent of a government's revenue, that government's loyalty shifts from taxpayers to the resource and it becomes a "petro state" — for example, Russia, Saudi Arabia or Venezuela.

Taxes are reduced ("there is no representation without taxation"), spending is increased, and accountability fades. Alberta is now a petro state, Nikiforuk said.

"(The state) comes to represent the resource, because that's where its chief source of revenue is coming from. There's nothing malicious about it, there's nothing conspiratorial about it — it just happens."

The oil sands also directly impact the rest of Canada, Nikiforuk said. A "petro loonie" that rises and falls with the price of oil affects manufacturing and forestry in B.C., Ontario and Québec. Saskatchewan may see severe acid rain from oil sands pollution. The Atlantic provinces provided labour to build the oil sands, but jobs have disappeared and those provinces are still highly dependent on imported oil.

In the recession, oil sands development has ground to a standstill. Nikiforuk said this represents a huge opportunity.

"With oil down . . . you have an opportunity to have a discussion about the pace and scale

of this project. When oil's 150 bucks a barrel, there is no discussion. It's an authoritarian discourse."

So what can be done? Nikiforuk recommends the "Peter Protocol," named after former Alberta premier Peter Lougheed, who has repeatedly stated the need to reconsider how the oil sands are developed.

In other words: Slow down development, change the royalty structure to give Albertans a bigger share, save limited resource revenues in the Heritage Fund, and invest in non-resource industry to ensure a healthy post-petroleum economy.

Nikiforuk, a highly decorated journalist and author, was brought to Cochrane through collaboration between Cochrane Ideas and the Cochrane Environmental Action Committee (CEAC).

"We have to get the population energized," said CEAC president Tim Giese. "The groundswell (of change) is going to come from rural areas."