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The blog of Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune

The Sierra Club and Natural Gas
02/02/2012

Have you ever had to turn away millions of dollars? It sounds crazy, but here's why the Sierra Club chose to do exactly that.

In 2010, soon after I became the organization's executive director, I learned that beginning in 2007 the Sierra Club had received more than \$26 million from individuals or subsidiaries of Chesapeake Energy, one of the country's largest natural gas companies. At the same time I learned about the donation, we at the Club were also hearing from scientists and from local Club chapters about the risks that natural gas drilling posed to our air, water, climate, and people in their communities. We cannot accept money from an industry we need to change. Very quickly, the board of directors, with my strong encouragement, cut off these donations and rewrote our gift acceptance policy. Let me tell you how it came about.

In the fall of 2005, Sierra Club staff and volunteer leaders agreed to make the enormous challenge of climate disruption the Club's highest priority. By that time, we had already begun to have great success with our Beyond Coal campaign, which had started in 2002, and which had already stopped the construction of several dozen new coal-fired power plants.

This Beyond Coal initiative has continued to have unparalleled success working with literally hundreds of other organizations, small and large, and using grassroots power to stop more than 160 new coal plants and prevent 500 million tons of carbon from entering the atmosphere. Sierra Club activists are now fighting Big Coal pollution in all 50 states and on college campuses nationwide. Today, the Sierra Club is not just focusing on stopping new plants from being built but is also accelerating efforts to retire old and dirty coal plants nationwide.

As this campaign was gearing up, the Sierra Club board of directors, working with the best science at the time and with extensive input from staff and volunteers, determined that natural gas, while far from ideal as a fuel source, might play a necessary role in helping us reach the clean energy future our children deserve. It was also during this time, in 2007, that the first contributions to the Sierra Club were made from entities or individuals associated with Chesapeake Energy. The idea was that we shared at least one common purpose -- to move our country away from dirty coal.

The big challenge, however, is what follows coal. How do we keep the lights on as we move quickly to an economy powered by clean, renewable energy? During the period that the Sierra Club first started receiving donations, several of our local chapters were becoming increasingly alarmed by dangerous and disruptive natural gas industry practices in their communities -- particularly horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," a technique where millions of gallons of water, laced with other ingredients (including, often, toxic chemicals) are pumped into rock to release gas deposits. Gradually, more and more legitimate questions were raised about the risks that fracking poses to our air, water, communities, and indeed our climate.

By the time I assumed leadership of the Club in March 2010, our view of natural gas had changed -- so I made sure our policy did, too. We created a strong natural gas campaign comprised of staff and volunteer leaders. Some chapters sought to establish tough safeguards at the state and federal level to protect their air and water; others sought to suspend fracking completely until those standards were in place. By mid-August 2010, with gas industry practices and our policies increasingly in conflict, I recommended to the Board, and it agreed, to end the funding relationship between the Club and the gas industry, and all fossil fuel companies or executives.

Our position today could not be more clear: We still need to move America beyond coal, as quickly as we can while taking care of the workers in the mines and at coal-burning utilities. And as we retire these coal plants, we'll need to replace them with as



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much clean energy as we possibly can. In the process, we'll use as little gas as possible and work to ensure that the gas that *is* used is produced as responsibly as possible.

It's time to stop thinking of natural gas as a "kinder, gentler" energy source. What's more, we do not have an effective regulatory system in this country to address the risks that gas drilling poses on our health and communities. The scope of the problems from under-regulated drilling, as well as a clearer understanding of the total carbon pollution that results from both drilling and burning gas, have made it plain that, as we phase out coal, we need to leapfrog over gas whenever possible in favor of truly clean energy. Instead of rushing to see how quickly we can extract natural gas, we should be focusing on how to be sure we are using less -- and safeguarding our health and environment in the meantime.

The Sierra Club opposes any natural gas development that poses unacceptable toxic risks to our land, water, and air. We insist that the volume and content of all fracking fluids and flowback should be disclosed, and that all toxics should be eliminated. There should be proper treatment, management, and disposal of both fracking fluids and toxic flowback. Fracking should not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that drinking water is protected and that all cumulative impacts can be mitigated. And, of course, many beautiful areas and important watersheds across this country should be off-limits to drilling.

Exempting the natural gas industry from environmental protections was a terrible idea. It looks even dumber today, when the real risks that natural gas drilling poses to water supplies and critical watersheds are that much more apparent.

Ultimately, the only safe, smart, and responsible way to address our nation's energy needs is to look beyond coal, oil, and gas, and focus on clean, efficient energy sources such as wind, solar, and geothermal. It's clear to countries around the world that the most successful 21st-century economies will be based on using energy that is safe, secure, and sustainable. Let's get to work building that economy right here at home.

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[Speaking Out for Clean Cars](#)

01/24/2012

Seven years ago this month, while I was at [Rainforest Action Network](#), we were working with several hundred California residents who were fighting to prevent their electric cars from being seized, crushed, and sold for scrap. These vehicles were fully functioning, economical and, because they were electric, didn't use a drop of gas. Yet they were being pulled off the roads by major automakers -- over the objections of the people who loved driving them. We didn't save all those cars back in 2005, but we did see more clearly than ever that if we want to move America beyond oil, then we need to jump-start the American auto industry.

Fortunately, times have changed. Today, I testified at an EPA hearing in San Francisco to support proposed standards that would raise vehicle efficiency to 54.5 miles per gallon, with electric vehicles as one of the primary ways to meet this goal. Here's my brief testimony....

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to California. I'm Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club is our nation's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization. We were founded by John Muir, who sought to defend Yosemite Valley and help create and expand Yosemite National Park. Today, nearly 120 years later, the Sierra Nevada range -- like every other ecosystem in America -- is suffering from the impacts of climate destabilization. It's just one reason why these standards are so important.

I want to thank EPA and NHTSA for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the incredible amount of work you and your staffs have put in along with California's Air Resources Board to make these historic standards possible.

I'm here today because our dangerous addiction to oil is threatening our quality of life by draining our wallets at the gas pump, polluting our air, and devastating our climate. Every day, we send nearly \$1 billion overseas for foreign oil -- wasting money that should be fueling American innovation and investment in growing industries like clean energy. Our oil

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addiction fuels the climate disruption that is increasing the number and intensity of severe droughts and devastating storms. It also puts our troops at risk around the world, and our families' health and security at risk here at home.

That's why these new fuel efficiency and carbon pollution standards for new cars and light trucks are such a big deal. President Obama's proposal to double the efficiency of America's cars and light trucks is the biggest single step we've ever taken to move America beyond oil. In 2025, American families will get to buy cars and light trucks that average 54.5 miles-per-gallon, and emit no more than 163 grams per mile of carbon pollution.

That's a big win for all Americans. To put this in perspective, the average family buying a new car in 2025 will save more than \$3,500 at the pump - even after paying for fuel-saving technology. In 2030, Americans will use 1.5 million fewer barrels of oil every day, the same amount we imported from Saudi Arabia and Iraq in 2010, and cut carbon pollution by an amount equivalent to shutting down 72 coal-fired power plants for a year.

The shift we have seen over the past few years in our auto industry is worthy of recognition. The United Auto Workers -- the backbone of the American manufacturing industry -- strongly supports these standards, as do Ford, GM, Chrysler, and the other major automakers. The industry is already enjoying a rebound, with new jobs in Michigan and across the Midwest; by 2030 these standards could create nearly half a million jobs across the country.

Here in California, we've been paving the way for cleaner cars for nearly a decade. I'm proud to live in a state that has led the nation in cutting pollution from cars -- from the pollution that compromises our health and our right to breathe healthy air to the pollution that threatens our climate. California pioneered the first-ever tailpipe standards for greenhouse gases, putting its authority and the Clean Air Act to work. It took years of litigation and 13 other states joining our state's clean cars program before we finally created the momentum at the national level to raise the national standards that had been stuck since the 1970s.

For more than twenty years, the Sierra Club and its members have pushed for stronger fuel-efficiency standards that will help America break its oil addiction. Already more than 20,000 of our members have sent in their comments, and more than a hundred of our members have testified at these hearings. We are committed to help educate members of the public about the benefits of buying the most efficient vehicle that meets their family's needs. The Sierra Club will also continue working to ensure that all Americans have more and better transportation choices -- by making walking and biking safer and increasing our access to transit.

As a father of two young kids, I'm relieved to know that the cars they'll drive in the years to come will use much less oil and emit less pollution. The reality is, these standards are strong, and they need to be stronger. Dirty oil pollutes our air, our water, and our atmosphere. And as we've seen over the past couple of elections, Big Oil cash pollutes our democracy. We look forward to working with President Obama, along with your agencies, to ensure that the Administration finalizes strong standards this July that will deliver the strongest possible benefits to American families and workers through 2025 and beyond. Thank you.

I had my say today, but you can still tell the EPA and NHTSA what *you* think about stronger fuel economy standards [here](#).

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[A Good Year for Moving Beyond Oil](#)

01/20/2012

We haven't even made it out of January, but 2012 is already shaping up as a watershed year in the fight to end our addiction to oil.

The big news, of course, was President Obama's decision not to approve the Keystone

XL tar sands pipeline. It was politically brave on the president's part, but it's also a huge symbol of the growing recognition that what's good for Big Oil has nothing to do with what's good for America and that the sooner we can separate oil and state, the better.

It's not just environmentalists who understand this -- it's everyone from labor (the United Steelworkers, United Auto Workers, and Transport Workers unions were just some of those that opposed the pipeline) to Nebraska ranchers to young people concerned about reckless climate-disrupting carbon pollution.

So kudos again to the Obama administration for standing up to intense pressure from what is still the wealthiest industry on the planet.

It's fantastic that we've stopped what once looked like an unstoppable pipeline, but let's not forget that if we really want to move our country beyond oil, we need to do more than just stop bad things -- we have to move forward on good things, too. Fortunately, this year the Obama administration also plans to make one particularly good thing happen: setting a new average fuel-economy standard of 54.5 mpg for cars and trucks by 2030.

That translates to [using 1.5 million fewer barrels of oil per day](#) by 2030 -- as much oil as we imported from Saudi Arabia and Iraq combined last year. The cumulative amount of carbon pollution eliminated would be a staggering 6 billion metric tons over the life of the program -- the equivalent to one year of current U.S. CO2 emissions. It will be the single biggest thing any nation has done to address climate pollution -- and the biggest step yet toward moving America beyond oil.

Next Tuesday, January 24, I'll be among those speaking here in San Francisco at the third and last of three public hearings on the new fuel standards (the others were in Detroit and Philadelphia). The public's invited, so come if you can. If you can't be there, [you can comment online, instead.](#)

[Detroit was a fitting venue](#) for a hearing because these new standards are enthusiastically supported by not just consumers and environmental groups but also by autoworkers and automobile manufacturers (thirteen of them, including the Big Three). In fact, the Sierra Club will be holding a press event and rally across the street from the San Francisco hearings at the Longshoreman's Hall (400 North Point St.). If you're in the Bay Area, join us at noon. Lots of our partners in labor, public health, and consumer protection will be there, and we'll have a few electric vehicles and super high-efficiency vehicles, as well as some special guests from city government.

Of course, many battles lie ahead -- Big Oil won't give up easily and still has plenty of political clout. But it's hard not to feel optimistic on the heels of a huge victory and the verge of a historic breakthrough.

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Big Oil Bullies and a Test of Wills

01/15/2012

Note: My coauthor for this post is Bill McKibben, the founder of [350.org](#).

In November, President Obama listened to the nation's [top climate scientist](#) and to bipartisan voices along the route of the proposed Keystone XL tar sands pipeline from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and declared that the project [required further review](#). After all, the Keystone XL's predecessor (another tar sands pipeline just called Keystone) had [leaked a dozen times in its first year](#). Tar sands oil is highly toxic, dangerous to transport, and [almost impossible to clean up](#). In Canada itself, strong public opposition has delayed tar sands pipeline proposals for additional environmental review and public comment.

But that kind of prudence didn't sit well with Big Oil, which is used to getting its way. (Remember, it was lax regulation that allowed BP to drill a shoddy, dangerous well in the Gulf of Mexico that they didn't even know how to cap when it exploded.) So Big Oil rolled out its army of lobbyists and PR experts -- among the [most elaborate and expensive lobbying operations](#) in America. The head of the American Petroleum Institute publicly promised ["huge political consequences"](#) if President Obama doesn't grant immediate permission for the pipeline. More saber rattling followed [in TV ads](#) and from the most powerful business lobby in Washington, D.C., the [U.S. Chamber of](#)

[Commerce](#) (which is [bankrolled largely by... Big Oil](#)).

They didn't just issue threats. Big Oil also commanded its [\\$12 million](#) posse in Congress to get to work. The minions rallied to the call, promoting Keystone XL as a top cause célèbre for 2012. House Speaker John Boehner kicked things off by holding the paychecks of working Americans [hostage to a rider](#) to the Payroll Tax Cut package in an attempt to force Keystone XL through.

That legislative rider has imposed a 60-day deadline on the president's decision, despite the inadequate and incomplete review, and despite the lack of a route through Nebraska. Any permit issued now would be a blank check written to an oil company with a [proven record](#) of [disregarding the rights](#) of the American farmers and ranchers whose land the pipeline would cross and threaten.

Given the billions in oil profits that are at stake, none of this should be surprising. But since few Americans actually care about increasing the oil industry's already bloated profits, its lobbyists have also been working overtime to sugarcoat the Keystone XL project with [exaggerated promises of jobs](#). It's a smart, if cynical, tactic. Everyone wants jobs. Unfortunately, this pipeline would generate far fewer construction jobs than promised and only a [few hundred permanent jobs](#).

Look behind the curtain and the real story here is the [\\$2 billion to \\$3.9 billion](#) more in profits each year that Big Oil would collect simply by being able to raise gas prices in the Midwest by between [ten and twenty cents](#) -- hurting Americans and chilling economic growth. Meanwhile, the Canadian crude being pumped 1,700 miles across six states, through farms and ranches, and directly over the water supply for millions of Americans would actually be [destined for export](#) from refineries in a Texas free-trade zone -- meaning billions more in oil profits that American workers would never see.

What Americans *would* see and experience is the [pollution](#). We would be opening a Pandora's box of climate pollution. We would be threatening the fragile drinking water supplies for millions. We would be putting the livelihoods of American farmers and ranchers in six states at risk. And all the while, oil companies alone would reap the profits -- which they'd largely keep in exorbitant salaries and stock bonuses, minus their continued investment in political influence.

By any objective measure, the Keystone XL pipeline is a patently bad idea that could never withstand rational scrutiny. Ultimately, this is a test of wills. Can the president stand up to threats from the wealthiest industry in the world? Big Oil has the money to inflict serious damage on anyone who challenges its singular goal -- profits. If President Obama does the right thing, he will also be doing a brave thing. But it would also be the smart thing: Standing up to bullies is, in the long run, almost always a good call.

We are hopeful, confident even, that the president *will* put the American people before Big Oil's profits. And we're also hopeful that Americans will start demanding far better from their Congress by insisting that our representatives stop selling their votes for campaign contributions. It's time to separate oil and state.

We need to break our addiction to oil, and we need to get oil companies out of our politics. Now that Big Oil has thrown down the gauntlet with Keystone XL, President Obama has a remarkable chance to start accomplishing both of those goals.

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[The Blink of an Eye](#)

01/14/2012

Every great road trip has moments that are... a little less than great. But then something amazing happens.

So it was on a hot day in July 1985. I was stuffed in a small minivan with my two sisters, my brother, and my parents. We had been driving ten hours from Los Angeles, through the Mojave Desert into northern Arizona. It was about 110 degrees outside, and inside, well, you know how siblings can be. Somewhere along the trip I had finally dozed off, and woke up as we pulled into a parking lot on the rim of the Grand Canyon. I stumbled out of the car, rubbed my eyes in the late afternoon sun, and what I saw was almost beyond the ability of my 13-year-old brain to comprehend.

Decades go by, but we collect only a handful of truly life-changing moments. Witnessing the birth of one's child. Catching that first perfect wave. Hearing the late, great Clarence Clemons wail his sax on "Thunder Road." For me, that first view of the

Grand Canyon during our classic family vacation trip to the great parks and monuments of the American West is right up there.

I'm not alone, of course. The Grand Canyon is one of the world's great wonders, and millions of people have shared the awe I felt. One of them was an 11-year-old boy called Barry, traveling with his grandmother on a sightseeing tour of the West much like the one my own family made.

Now, four decades later, President Barack Obama has helped ensure the Grand Canyon will continue to endure and inspire. The Department of the Interior has announced [a 20-year ban on new hard rock mineral leasing and mining](#) (primarily for uranium) in one million acres adjacent to Grand Canyon National Park. At stake is not only the canyon itself but also the safety of the water that the Colorado River supplies to 18 million people across the Southwest.

President Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar deserve kudos for these protections ([you can send them a message here](#)). Let's hope this is just the beginning of what this Administration can do for protecting both the Grand Canyon and other wild places. For instance, designating Arizona's North Kaibab Plateau as a new Grand Canyon Watershed National Monument would protect important sources of groundwater, preserve 22 sensitive species (many of which occur nowhere else in the world), as well as promote and protect the local tourism economy and jobs.

The Colorado River needed millions of years to carve out the Grand Canyon. Letting mining companies run rampant could ruin it in the geological blink of an eye. The good news is that protecting it can happen just as fast. Thank you and congratulations to the Obama administration for doing what's right.

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Green, Alive, and Kicking

01/09/2012

Remember "the death of environmentalism"? A funny thing happened on the way to the funeral. The environmental movement hasn't been this energized, engaged, and relevant since 1970, when 20 million people celebrated the first Earth Day, Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, and Congress overwhelmingly passed the Clean Air Act. Those three events marked the birth of the modern environmental movement and, four decades later, they still reverberate as it faces both its greatest challenges and its most exciting opportunities.

In 2011, the environmental movement rediscovered that its most valuable asset is the spirit that brought millions of ordinary people together at that first Earth Day. Whether you call them tree-huggers, do-gooders, or Americans, it is these millions of ordinary people who refuse to succumb to cynicism and apathy that remain the heart and soul of this movement.

Nowhere was that more evident than during November's massive protest outside the White House to urge President Obama to reject the 1,700-mile tar-sands pipeline, which would carry dirty oil from Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. As with other populist movements this year, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, the protest against the Keystone XL pipeline was provoked by a deep sense of injustice. I watched with a mixture of pride and awe as more than 12,000 people, young and old, from every walk of life and from every part of the nation, came together to hold a president accountable to his own principles. Fortunately, [the man in the White House got the message](#).

Last summer, I listed stopping the Keystone XL as one of four major decisions facing the President Obama that would test his environmental commitment. Two of the others were important clean-air standards expected from the Environmental Protection Agency. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson was able to get one of them across the finish line -- the first-ever standard for how much mercury and other toxic emissions we allow power plants to pump into the air we breathe and water we drink. [This rule will prevent hundreds of thousands of illnesses and up to 17,000 premature deaths each year](#).

On the other clean-air standard, though, the president made a serious mistake by allowing the postponement of an important rule to protect the public by strengthening safeguards against smog pollution.

President Obama's fourth decision was on how ambitious to make new fuel-economy and emission standards for cars and light trucks in 2025. This time, the administration came through, with a strong standard of 54.5 mpg that will save consumers money, significantly decrease carbon pollution, and do more than any other measure to wean us from our dependence on oil.

So on those big issues, we scored three out of four with Obama this year -- not a bad record for a movement that supposedly was being ignored or taken for granted by the president. The most exciting success story of the year, however, required no help from the president or Congress. It couldn't have happened without the Clean Air Act, though.

Although our air has gotten significantly cleaner since 1970, a shocking amount of pollution still makes it dirtier and unhealthy than it should be -- and coal-fired power plants are the biggest culprit. [The Sierra Club's campaign to move Beyond Coal](#) began almost ten years ago, but it really took off in 2011. Although we got a gigantic boost this year when the Bloomberg Philanthropies committed \$50 million, the campaign is still driven at its heart by the grassroots energy of people who live in the shadow of polluting coal-fired power plants and can see for themselves how it's sickening their children and blighting their communities. By year's end, we secured the retirement of almost 90 dirty, outdated coal plants, and defeated more than 160 proposed new plants. That doesn't sound like an ineffective movement to me.

Of course, stopping coal wouldn't be possible [if we didn't have something better to offer](#). Fortunately, clean renewable energy sources are taking off in spite of attempts by the fossil-fuel apologists to pretend otherwise. When government red tape made it impossible for SolarCity to secure a federal loan guarantee for its project to install rooftop solar panels on military housing across the country, it looked like a huge missed opportunity -- the chance to provide clean energy to 120,000 homes. In fact, it was too good an opportunity to miss. The program will move forward with private financing, bringing not just clean solar power but jobs for thousands of vets and military families. That's just one of the many clean-energy success stories this year, but there will be even more to come. By 2020, clean-energy investments will create as many as 1.9 million jobs nationally.

Believe it: This movement is stronger than ever. More importantly, it will keep gaining strength for a simple reason: Its core values -- fairness, justice, and responsibility -- are shared by the majority (let's say at least 99 percent) of people everywhere.

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Truth and Consequences

01/05/2012

It's another warm, dry, sunny day here in San Francisco today. Highs might hit 70 degrees. Temperatures are in the 80s in Los Angeles, with a high of 90 in Fullerton. It's January 5.

Has the weather been weird where you are, too? Too hot? Too wet? Not wet enough? Our family was eagerly anticipating a holiday trip to the slopes of the Sierra Nevada. No one was more excited than my son, Sebastian, who was all set to buckle on his first pair of skis. Only problem: Nothing to ski on except man-made snow thinly spread over what the locals half seriously refer to as "Sierra cement." Not ideal conditions for a three-year-old just learning to find his ski legs.

Turns out we would have had about as much luck finding snow on the Fourth of July. This has been [the fourth-driest July-December in the northern Sierra Nevada since 1923](#). We're not ready to start panicking just yet, but there's a lot more at stake than Sebastian's first ski lesson. California relies on the Sierra snowpack for two-thirds of its water supply.

You could argue that this record dry spell in Northern California is a fluke. It's still early in the season, so I certainly wouldn't hold it up as proof of global climate disruption. What's harder to dismiss, though, is the pattern of extreme weather -- and disasters -- that's emerging around the planet.

[Globally, the summer of 2011 was the third hottest on record](#). In the U.S., it was our second hottest summer ever. The ratio of record-high-temperature days to record-low-temperature days across the U.S. was 2.8 to 1. From 2000 to 2009, that ratio was

about 2 to 1. From the 1950s through the 1970s, it was closer to even, but from the 1980s on, each decade has had [an ever-greater proportion of record hot days](#).

Unfortunately, extreme weather has grave consequences. Last year the world experienced an unprecedented number of weather-related disasters. Texas suffered a devastating drought that [killed as many as half a million trees](#) and [reduced the state's cattle herd by 12 percent](#) -- more than at any time since the Great Depression. On the other side of the planet, the failure of the seasonal rains in East Africa led to [tragic drought and famine](#) that took the lives of an estimated 30,000 children under the age of five. Meanwhile, Thailand, Australia, Colombia, and Brazil all experienced floods that were either the deadliest or the most costly natural disasters in their histories.

The U.S. had major floods, too, but most of our weather-related natural disasters involved tornadoes and other storms. Iowa was just one of the Midwestern states that had heightened tornado activity, including a series of twisters in May that destroyed two-thirds of Joplin, MO, and killed 161 people.

Still, even though Iowa got off relatively lightly in terms of extreme weather last year, it suffered an influx of extreme candidates during its Republican caucus this month. Not a single candidate there was ready to talk seriously about climate disruption, carbon pollution, or the importance of moving beyond fossil fuels. They are impervious to data. Most of them won't even admit that global warming is an established truth -- including the governor of the state that just experienced not just its own hottest summer, but the hottest summer of any state ever.

That's almost as weird (and at least as scary) as the weather.

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The Keystone XL Pipeline Scam

12/20/2011

With all the political posturing in Congress over the Keystone XL tar-sands oil pipeline, it's easy to lose sight of the real issue: This pipeline is dangerous, unnecessary, and would cost the American people far more than we can afford. What we're watching unfold in Washington, DC, is more than just a high-stakes political power play -- it's a scam undertaken by Big Oil's congressional puppets on the orders of oil companies that have billions of dollars at stake.

The politicians pushing the pipeline are (how can I put this politely?) lying to the American people and pandering for dirty oil money. What do we *really* stand to gain if this thing is rammed down our throats? Higher gas prices, more air pollution, the threat of poisoned water, and enough carbon pollution to make stopping climate disruption next to impossible -- but few of the jobs and none of the huge profits that Big Oil would reap.

Exaggerated job numbers play well to public concern about unemployment and the economy, but they are a hollow promise. The numbers from TransCanada -- the company behind the pipeline -- have already been discredited as [fuzzy math](#) for using tricks like double counting and incidental employment for dancers, choreographers, and speech therapists. Here's some non-fuzzy math: The pipeline would [raise gas prices](#) across the Midwest -- hurting both consumers and businesses. Ironically, the pipeline could actually destroy more jobs than it generates.

Meanwhile, our nation's largest aquifer, which supplies one-third of U.S. irrigated farmland and the drinking water for millions, would be put at imminent risk. Although that risk most directly affects the farmers and ranchers whose livelihoods hang in the balance, every American would feel the effect of an oil-spill catastrophe in the nation's agricultural heartland.

TransCanada has a dismal record of cutting corners, ignoring the law, and spilling oil. The company's Keystone 1 pipeline spilled more than [12 times](#) in its first year of operation, including a 21,000-gallon spill in North Dakota in May 2011 that shot a [60-foot geyser](#) of oil into the air. Last year, the U.S. EPA determined that sections of the Keystone 1 pipeline were [constructed using inferior steel](#) and defective welds.

That means we have an irresponsible company asking for permission to build a kind of pipeline that is already far [riskier](#) than normal. Unrefined tar sands crude is both thicker and more toxic than conventional crude oil. Sand in the mixture scours the inside of a pipe, and highly reactive chemicals in the crude corrode the steel. Making things even worse, the heavy, gooey tar sands has to be pumped at far higher

temperatures and pressures than conventional oil.

The riskiness of piping this toxic crude all the way across America is bad enough, but on top of that, this pipeline would actually make the U.S. less secure. Retired Brigadier General Steven Anderson [said it](#) plainly:

The Keystone XL pipeline will not reduce America's dependence on Middle East oil, or do anything to get us off oil completely, which is key to America's national security future. Much of the oil produced by Keystone won't go right to American gas-tanks -- it is to be exported, meaning we will need to import oil the same as before.

But pipeline advocates aren't really concerned about what's best for the U.S. At least one oil company backing the pipeline, Valero, has [made it clear](#) that [its main goal is to reach growing foreign diesel fuel markets](#). Port Arthur, TX, where the Keystone XL would end, is a Foreign Trade Zone. That means oil companies would avoid paying U.S. taxes on oil that is imported from Canada, refined in Texas, and then exported to China, Latin America, or Europe. The American people get to assume all of the risk, but would see none of the benefits, not even the tax revenues.

This pipeline is a bad deal that would generate billions in profits for oil companies while leaving Americans to pay the price in higher fuel costs, energy insecurity, and polluted air and water. At a time when we need to be doing everything we can to get off oil and reduce global-warming pollution, the Keystone XL would take us in exactly the wrong direction. Tar sands oil is a gigantic climate disaster waiting to happen.

President Obama did the right and responsible thing by deciding to reevaluate this project. The Keystone XL tar sands pipeline is dangerous, unnecessary, and would cost the American people far more than we can afford. We cannot -- we must not -- let Big Oil and its minions in Congress force it upon us against our will.

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Finding Our Voices

12/19/2011

Have you ever been to Bryce Canyon National Park? I still remember standing at Sunset Point on my first visit as a teenager, hoping to sneak away to climb the hoodoos in the valley below. It's one of the most beautiful, inspiring places in the country, which is why when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced a public meeting in Salt Lake City to gather public comments on its proposal to approve a giant coal strip-mine next to Bryce Canyon National Park, it wasn't hard to find citizens ready to object. More than 200 showed up at the Salt Lake City Library to speak their minds.

What they found when they got there, though, was that this particular "hearing" would be like a silent film -- only written comments allowed.

When asked why there would be no opportunity for public testimony, BLM officials said they were required to hold only one public meeting and it had already happened the week before in Cedar City, where testimony was gathered from mine employees and other mine boosters.

That answer didn't sit well with disgruntled participants who had come to voice their objections to the strip mine. What happened next was citizen democracy at its most inspired.

Borrowing a tactic from Occupy Salt Lake City (where some of the participants had come from) a group of protesters started a "human microphone" and began reading their testimony in short tight phrases that were then repeated by the crowd around the room. The stunned BLM officials watched nervously as the actual public took over their "public" meeting.

The message the public had for the BLM was that it should reject the strip-mine proposal, protect the park and wildlife, and promote clean-energy alternatives -- not more dirty coal.

Eventually, former national BLM director Patrick Shea, who is now a private citizen, offered to serve as an informal hearing officer and take oral testimony from anyone in the room. He apologized to his former agency colleagues for usurping their meeting, but said he felt it was important that citizens be allowed to voice their concerns in a

public space. He asked for volunteers to record the testimony in writing and to then submit it to the BLM.

If the BLM's plan was to quietly slip in and out of town and avoid a public confrontation, then it seriously miscalculated -- and underestimated both the outrage and the ingenuity that a proposal to strip-mine next to one of our most treasured national parks could generate. When the people needed it, they found their voice.

How about you? You may have missed the human microphone, but you can still [help stop the strip mine before it's too late](#).

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Mercury Poisoning: A Parents' Revolt

12/09/2011

On Dec. 16, the Obama administration is expected to finally release [new standards for protecting us from mercury and other toxic heavy metals from power plant emissions](#). All of us have reason to be glad, but parents (and anyone who might ever want to be a parent) should especially welcome this long overdue protection. My wife Mary and I co-authored a column for Sierra magazine that explains why:

It started before we even brought our first child home from the hospital. Electrical sockets needed to be covered, cabinet doors secured, knives stowed out of the reach of tiny hands. We live in earthquake country, so we finally got around to bolting our bookshelves to the wall.

Like any parents, we'll do anything in our power to keep our kids safe. We know that our power has its limits, but that doesn't stop us from trying.

Getting the house ready was just the beginning. We were also determined to protect our daughter from less-obvious dangers. Well aware of the toxic chemicals that increasingly find their way into our bodies, we shopped for the healthiest foods we could find -- and still do.

Of course, not all Americans have the same easy access to fresh, organic, and healthy foods that we do. In lots of neighborhoods it can be hard to find decent produce. But even so, you'd think there'd still be plenty of nutritious alternatives to fast food, like the humble tuna sandwich.

Not anymore. Tuna, like many types of fish, is often contaminated with mercury, a neurotoxin that damages the brain and nervous system, particularly in fetuses and young children. Mercury in the bloodstreams of pregnant and nursing women can result in birth defects like learning disabilities, reduced IQ, and cerebral palsy.

We've known about the dangers of mercury for a century. (It's what made the Mad Hatter mad.) We've also known how the fish get contaminated: primarily via coal-fired power plants, whose smokestacks spew almost 50 tons of mercury annually into the air we breathe.

A heavy metal like mercury does not stay in the atmosphere for long. It eventually falls to Earth, inexorably working its way up the food chain until it winds up in the tuna sandwich in some kid's lunch box -- or on the sushi platter ordered by a young woman who's just become pregnant.

And that's where we get mad -- both as environmentalists and as parents: There is absolutely no reason our kids should be exposed to this poison. The EPA was first charged with limiting toxic air pollutants like mercury more than 20 years ago, during the George H. W. Bush administration. The technology to filter mercury from coal-plant smokestacks is widely available. But there's still no national limit on how much mercury a coal-fired power plant can release into the air. It's like debating what kind of childproof latches to put on the cabinets while the kids are playing with the knives.

This past March, the EPA finally proposed a standard that would require coal plants to keep more than 90 percent of their mercury emissions out of the atmosphere. The new rule would also apply to such cancer-causing metals as arsenic, chromium, and nickel. Filtering out these poisons would prevent hundreds of thousands of illnesses and up to 17,000 premature deaths each year. It would be the single biggest measure to save American lives in a generation.

Incredibly, it might not happen. As we write this, the EPA is under attack by politicians whose first allegiance is not to American children but to the polluters who don't want to clean up their dirty power plants. Possible reason: The polluters shelled out nearly \$30 million to these members of Congress who continue to vote for dirty air.

We know that it's impossible to protect our children from every possible harm. Inevitably, knees will get scraped and probing fingers will get pinched in cabinet doors, and that giant leap off the porch might end in a tumble. But to endanger our kids solely for the sake of polluters' bottom line? As parents, and as Americans, [that's something we can never accept.](#)

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