



WESTERN RESOURCE
ADVOCATES



Fossil Foolishness

*Utah's Pursuit of
Tar Sands and Oil Shale*



Executive Summary

In his 2010 “State of the State” address, Utah Governor Gary Herbert challenged the state to be at the “forefront of solving the world’s energy challenges.” By launching the Utah Energy Initiative, a 10-year plan to assess Utah’s energy options, Governor Herbert outlined the need to develop a range of energy sources, from traditional fossil fuels to renewables such as solar or wind. The Governor’s speech did not mention tar sands or oil shale, and rightly so.

Western Resource Advocates (WRA) knows that when it comes to finding solutions to our energy needs, there are no simple answers. Americans face significant challenges as energy demands soar and oil becomes harder to find. Each method we choose requires trade-offs to balance the many political, economic, public health, and ecological considerations.

With that thought in mind, WRA examined tar sands and oil shale as potential sources of transportation fuel, with special attention to what that would mean for Utah. In “Fossil Foolishness”, we focus on the likely impacts of commercial development of these deposits on Utah’s water, air, and economy, as well as rural communities.

What we found is not a pretty picture.

If our nation has to rely on oil shale as our last source of oil, we’re in deep trouble.”

-- Don Christiansen, General Manager,
Central Utah Water Conservancy District

Conclusions:

1. Tar sands and oil shale production would not contribute significantly to domestic U.S. oil supply – but, industrial production in Utah would have significant negative impacts. Production would require giant mining operations and huge infrastructure development, resulting in enormous damage to water, air, energy, and communities.

2. Commercial shale development would require huge quantities of water in the country's second most arid state. Utah's remaining Colorado River allocation should not be used for a speculative energy source at the expense of municipal, agricultural, recreational, or ecological purposes.

3. Commercial development of tar sands and oil shale would adversely affect water quality. Water used in tar sands and oil shale production would contain contaminants that would degrade the quality of the Utah's water, raise costs for water treatment, and place burdens on downstream uses.

4. Development of tar sands and oil shale would harm Utah's recreation economy. Degraded water and air quality would adversely impact Utah's \$7.1 billion recreation economy, which provides 113,000 jobs.

5. Climate change is real, and development can only make it worse. Tar sands and oil shale would be among the most carbon-intensive energy sources, further contributing to climate change

6. Utah can be a new energy leader. By focusing finite human and financial capital on commercial tar sands and oil shale development, we divert attention from the very real opportunity to provide new, renewable energy sources that will power a vibrant economy and sustain livable communities for our children and grandchildren.

Utah is rightly committed, as Governor Herbert said, "to ensure Utah's continued access to our own clean and low-cost energy resources; to be on the cutting edge of new energy technologies; and to foster economic opportunities and create more jobs." Tar sands and oil shale fail to meet this vision – they do not promise to be clean, economically-sustainable, efficient, environmentally-sound or smart enough to be part of our energy future.



*Water quality impacts
from oil shale development*



Tar sands upgrading



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Western Resource Advocates is a nonprofit environmental law and policy organization dedicated to protecting the West's land, air, and water.

Utah Office
150 South 600 East, Suite 2AB
Salt Lake City, UT 84102
Tel: (801) 487-9911

Main Office
2260 Baseline Road, Suite 200
Boulder, CO 80302
Tel: (303) 444-1188

www.westernresourceadvocates.org

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For questions, or to receive a hard copy of the report, contact Peter Roessmann, Communications Coordinator, at (303) 444-1188 x 221, or peter@westernresources.org

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