

No faith in Trans Mountain pipeline expansion

As Indigenous people on the west coast launch another court challenge to the pipeline that would deliver Alberta's bitumen to markets in Asia, religious orders and ecumenical organizations are adding their voice to an increasingly heated debate by signing onto an open letter calling for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to reverse his approval for the expanded Trans Mountain pipeline.

More than 70 organizations – including the faith-based Citizens for Public Justice, Kairos and the Sisters of Sion – have signed the [letter](#) crafted by the David Suzuki Foundation appealing for a cancellation of the project that they fear will result in oil spills and a world unsafe for future generations.

The stakes are high in this fight centred on the [\\$7.4-billion project](#) by Kinder Morgan Inc. A new pipeline would triple the capacity of the existing oil pipeline between Edmonton and Burnaby, B.C.

Since the project was announced almost five years ago, supported by major players in the oil industry as well as the federal government, the voices of opposition from First Nations, environmentalists and the B.C. government have grown increasingly loud. The province has asked a court to clarify its jurisdiction over the pipeline and Kinder Morgan is threatening to pull out by May 31 unless it gets a go-ahead from Ottawa on the project.

As debate rages, there is also a faith-based voice, though it may struggle to be heard.



Robert Grosschedl is a Catholic oil worker from Edmonton.

In Alberta, more moralizing over climate change and Indigenous rights might be seen as an attack on people's livelihoods, said Catholic oil worker Robert Grosschedl.

"They always put it on religion. I'm sorry, religion has nothing to do with industrial stuff like this. It (religion) is the way you treat other people," said the Syncrude support trade worker, who has been making his living in Alberta's oilsands for eight years.

Grosschedl understands the need to limit climate change and shift to greener sources of energy. But he doesn't believe our dependence on oil can be erased just by saying no to every oil development.

"People don't realize it affects the whole, entire industry – technically the whole world," he said. "They're not thinking the bigger picture. They're just thinking in their own little world. That's the biggest problem."



Joe Gunn, executive director of Citizens for Public Justice

Signing onto the David Suzuki Foundation letter asking Ottawa to reverse course on the Trans-Mountain pipeline was not any mere whim, said Citizens for Public Justice executive director Joe Gunn.

"It's divisive, there's no question about that," Gunn said. "There's nothing wrong with using moral and ethical criteria to look at divisive issues. That's what churches should do; that's what CPJ tries to do."

The ecumenical social justice organization understands that working people who depend on the oilsands to pay their mortgages can't be bystanders in the national debate about just how much of Alberta's bitumen should be left in the ground. Ottawa needs to manage "a just transition for working people," Gunn

said.

“It’s no question that economies all over the world have set up massive projects for fossil fuel development and we’re not going to be able to sustain that in the future,” he said.

Despite an atmosphere in Alberta that has seen industry and academic leaders up in arms over a University of Alberta honorary degree awarded to David Suzuki, Gunn doesn’t accept the idea that signing the letter is an attack on Alberta.

“CPJ is not just an organization that sits in Ottawa. We have members all over the country and we have three board members in Alberta,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong with having these conversations. There’s nothing wrong with disagreeing.”

The David Suzuki Foundation insists its letter isn’t about politics, national unity or symbolism.

“Nothing in this letter indicates anything but sound science and a rationale for the prime minister to reconsider the vision. This is all based on science,” said foundation communications specialist Theresa Beer.

“At this point in time, climate change is the greatest threat to life on Earth. The Pope was very clear in [*Laudato Si’*](#). The Pope spoke to climate justice.”

Laudato Si’ is Pope Francis’s encyclical letter on care for the environment.

Even though the new pipeline runs along the same route as an existing pipeline, the foundation warns it poses grave risks.

“The current Trans Mountain pipeline has spilled 82 times since 1961, according to the company’s own reports,” reads the letter which garnered an initial 60 signatures when it was launched April 25.

“The likelihood of an oil spill from expanded bitumen shipments in the Burrard Inlet over 50 years is estimated at between 79 and 87 per cent.”

The National Energy Board did not take into account the effect a spill on Canada’s west coast would have on west-coast workers in tourism, film and fisheries, the Suzuki Foundation said.

“A single spill could wipe out more than \$1.2 billion in economic activity and result in the loss of more than 12,000 jobs,” said the letter.

Kairos Canada executive director Jennifer Henry backed up her organization’s signature on the Suzuki Foundation letter by joining faith and Indigenous

leaders on Burnaby Mountain, to protest the pipeline and to launch a further legal challenge to its approval.

The idea that Asian markets for Alberta bitumen are a national economic priority doesn't stand up to scrutiny, said Kairos ecological justice program co-ordinator Beth Lorimer.

"We just really don't see the market value for it," she said. "The price of oil is decreasing. Canada doesn't have the best type of oil to get to market. It's really resource-heavy to get it out of the ground. Mixing it with a diluent doesn't make it an attractive product on the market. Canada has other things to offer the international markets."

If oil workers stand to lose their jobs, governments need to step in and provide alternatives, Lorimer said.