

Sixteen for '16 - Number 16: No Tar Sands, No Offshore Drilling, No Hydraulic Fracturing and Definitely No More Coal

By [Salvatore Babones](#), Truthout | Op-Ed

Global warming is caused by the burning of fossil fuels. (1) It's very simple, really. Digging things up and burning them takes carbon out of the ground and puts it into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide and other gases in the atmosphere trap warmth through a well-understood and universally accepted mechanism called the greenhouse effect. (2)

Human beings really are on course to extract all fossil fuels, wherever they are, anywhere in the world. No deposit of oil, coal or natural gas is too deep, too remote or too diffuse to keep us from getting it out of the ground and burning it. Anything existing in or on the surface of the earth that can be burned, will be burned.

Case in point: the Canadian tar sands. Tar sands are "a combination of clay, sand, water, and bitumen, a heavy black viscous oil." (3) They are mined in giant, open-pit mines or by pumping hot water into the ground to scald the oil out of the solid rock.

The Athabasca tar sands are at the heart of the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project, which former NASA scientist James Hansen famously called "game over" for the earth's climate. (4)

Tar sands may be about as bad as things get for the environment, but conventional sources of fossil fuels aren't that much better. Who could forget the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico? The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 4.9 million barrels of oil were released into the ocean as a result of this single accident. (5)

As if this weren't extreme enough, along came fracking. Hydraulic fracturing - "fracking" - involves the pumping of millions of gallons of chemical-laced water into the ground in order to crack open rocks so that tiny bubbles of natural gas trapped inside them can be liberated and brought up to the surface.

Does this sound like a good idea? Thousands of fracking-induced earthquakes say no. (6)

Sensible or not, fracking is economical for two reasons only. First, in the 1990s, the development of directional drilling made it possible to drill a gas well that follows the contours of the narrow shale formations in which shale gas is trapped. (7)

Second, in 2005, Congress specifically exempted "hydraulic fracturing operations" from regulation by the EPA. (8) Frackers can poison your water and you have no right to know about it, never mind do anything about it.

Josh Fox's 2010 documentary Gasland made flammable drinking water and exploding kitchen taps a staple of internet video entertainment. But 2010 was just the beginning of the fracking boom.

Natural gas extraction from the Marcellus shale formation (on which Fox's land sits) expanded by more than 650 percent between 2010 and 2014 - and is still growing rapidly. (9)

And then there's coal. It is hard to believe that such a thing as "mountaintop removal mining" actually exists, but there it is.

Mountaintop removal mines approved between 1992 and 2002 were projected to destroy at least 1,200 miles of streams, and the EPA estimates that mines approved between 2002 and 2012 will have roughly the same impact. (10) Mountaintop removal started before 1992 and continued after 2012, so well over 2,400 miles of streams have presumably been written off. They won't be coming back.

Neither will the mountains. That's the thing about mountains: No one is building new ones, at least not in our lifetimes. Entire mountains the size of small cities are being destroyed forever in return for a maximum of 10 to 15 years of mining productivity. (11)

That is nothing short of madness - unless, of course, you like to hunt elk or play golf on the newly flattened land. (12) At least three golf courses have been built on former mountaintop removal mining sites across Appalachia. (13)

Tar sands, offshore oil, shale gas and coal mining: All this means carbon, and carbon of the worst kind. Forget about 2 degrees Celsius and forget about mere "climate change"; the way things are going, the earth will be a Venus-like hell planet before we're through with it.

If Hollywood is right, whenever aliens invade the earth, the USA comes to the rescue. The United States made the world safe for democracy in World War I, defeated fascism in World War II and undermined communism while avoiding World War III. President George W. Bush launched a global war on terror that President Obama is still fighting today.

Maybe it is time for a different kind of war, or better yet, a plan. We need a plan to stop global warming, if not now, then soon. We need to get out of our cars, and to do that we need to relearn how to live together in ways that don't require cars. We need to keep the earth's remaining fossil fuels firmly in the ground. We need to burn less and plant more.

It is almost certainly too late to prevent catastrophic global warming. It is perhaps not too late to save the earth itself. If government of the people, by the people and for the people is not to perish from the earth, then there must be an earth. It is our responsibility to work together to ensure that there is.

## Footnotes

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11. Environmental Protection Agency, The Effects of Mountaintop Mines and Valley Fills on Aquatic Ecosystems of the Central Appalachian Coalfields, 2011, page 10.
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