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The proposed Kalama Methanol Plant presents yet another false solution to the problems we are faced with in this pivotal time. A time marked by disasters, inequality, and a sense of uncertainty, if not doom. Wildfires and storms are increasing in severity and destructiveness; devastating droughts are followed by ruinous floods; from the Arctic region to the Antarctic continent, ice and glaciers are melting. We are not only reading about these disasters, many of us are living through them. Thousands lost their homes in recent years - on the west coast to wildfires, on the east coast to hurricanes. We know the cause of these calamities, climate breakdown driven by the burning of fossil fuels. We have known this for over 40 years - James Hansen first testified to congress about global warming in 1988 - yet instead of decreasing global emissions, we almost doubled them by 2017.

The possibility of changing course, still exists. If we follow the recommendations of the IPCC and reduce emissions by about 50% in the next ten years, we can still prevent the earth's climate from completely spinning out of control. This is why the proposal to build a large methanol plant at the mouth of the Columbia River is utterly preposterous. Any project that relies on the continued extraction of carbon from the earth, where it is safely sequestered, sets us on a dangerous path to irreversible climate disaster.

But climate disaster is not the only threat exacerbated by continued fracking and drilling. If, as the proponents claim, the methanol produced by this plant would be shipped to Asia and used in plastic manufacturing, it would contribute to the ecological disaster caused by the rapacious use and discard of plastics. Today plastics are ubiquitous components of our environment. Most of us know about the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch," which turns out to be not so great for life in and around the oceans. Plastics are making their way into the stomachs of whales, fish, and birds. Not even remote islands are safe from their toxic reach. In the Pacific Ocean's Midway Atoll, an Albatross nursery, chicks are dying of plastic pieces unwittingly fed to them by their parents. Scientists are predicting that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans. Is this the earth we want to leave behind? If innovation were truly at the core of NW Innovation Works' business model, the company would work on developing more efficient, effective and sustainable processes for collecting and recycling the plastics currently in circulation instead of proposing to make more.

If the methanol would be used as fuel, it would worsen the climate crisis by contributing to greenhouse gas pollution and by delaying the adaptation of renewable energy sources. Data suggests that fracking operations are leaking much more methane than previously estimated. While more research is needed before a final conclusion can be reached, circumstantial evidence is strong. The New York Times reported last December that "Methane levels have soared since 2007 for reasons that still aren't fully understood. But fracking natural-gas production, which accelerated just as atmospheric methane levels jumped, is a prime suspect."

Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas, 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Although it does break down after about 20 years, this does not help us. Climate research determined that we have only ten years to reduce fossil fuel consumption by half to prevent irreversible climate destruction. Therefore, as Ecology notes, "the Washington Legislature has adopted aggressive limits to reduce our state's emissions in the years ahead."

Permitting the construction of what "would be one of the 10 largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in the state," would sabotage the emission limits our legislators worked hard to establish. Ecology's Second Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SSEIS) shows that "if constructed, the proposed Northwest Innovation Works methanol facility would" be responsible for at least 4.6 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year. Nonetheless, the authors of the SSEIS hypothesize in their conclusion that global emissions would be worse without the Kalama plant, based on the assumption that the methanol produced in Kalama would replace methanol produced from coal. That assumption is flimsy, if not misguided. If anything, the current pandemic is teaching us how quickly predictive models can fall apart. Approving the construction of this facility would set us on a dangerous path to irreversible climate breakdown.

Mitigating climate and ecological breakdown requires us to treat the root of the crises. We need to leave carbon in the ground, stop burning fossil fuels, and limit the production of plastics. I am urging Washington's Department of Ecology to step up to the task and stop NW Innovation Works from constructing what would be the world's largest methanol plant in Kalama.

Sources

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