

National Post

Lorne Gunter: A European reprieve Canada's oil sands

Lorne Gunter Feb 24, 2012 – 7:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Feb 23, 2012 5:58 PM ET



A cup of heavy oil produced at the Statoil oil sands operation near Conklin, Alta.

This has been a good week for Alberta's oil sands — if you measure success in tiny increments. The Eu label oil from the 'sands as dirty, and one of the world's leading climate scientists released a study showing Alberta's vast bitumen deposits will have very little effect on climate.

The news from Europe is welcome if not quite a full-fledged victory. On Thursday, bureaucrats and ex member countries failed to pass an amendment to the union's Fuel Quality Directive that would have l

more harmful to the climate than convention crude. The vote was 89 in favour of the amendment, 128. Since there was no majority for or against the motion, it neither passed nor failed.

But Thursday's vote was never going to be the final word. It was, in essence, a survey of environment c government scientists meant only to inform Europe's energy and environment ministers. The minister likely late this year — from which will emerge their recommendation to the European Parliament, wh ultimate vote on whether or not oil sands oil should be considered "dirty" oil.

Related

[John Ivison: Political will not enough to fuel new oil sands refineries](#)

[Terry Glavin: Canada sells the oil sands to China. Then complains about 'foreign interference'](#)

It could be a year or more before the EU adopts a final position. And while this week's stalemate is bet recommendation against the oil sands, a lot could yet go wrong because the decision is now in the han

Think back to the EU's 2009 vote to ban all products from Canada's seal hunt (except those harvested traditional techniques). When the continent's elected representatives were voting whether or not to ke and meat, they were reassured by the union's environment commission that 98% or more of the pups killed humanely and ethically. Yet still the parliamentarians decided to go with their emotions rather t embargo on Canadian seal products.

It's not hard to see the same thing happening with the oil sands now that the decision has been bumpe especially given that the experts were even less emphatic than they were concerning the seal hunt. No has graduated to the realm of opinion polls and re-election bids, it's not hard at all to see MEPs — Mer Parliament — casting aside any expert doubt and labelling oil sands' oil less desirable out of a desire to

Even if the EU does eventually decide to discriminate against oil from the oil sands, that will not preve buying it. Rather, it will merely mean they have to take a bigger hit against their greenhouse-gas emiss of oil from sources deemed less environmentally damaging. That could have some impact on Canadiar huge market for our oil at the moment, anyway.

But the outcome could easily go the other way, too.

Given that Europe is about to cut off oil imports from Iran (if Iran doesn't cut off oil exports to Europe must then find replacement supplies elsewhere, I doubt that a determination that Canadian oil is susp on our sales. Iran ships nearly 40 million barrels of oil to Europe in a year; we ship fewer than 700,00 European Directorate-General for Energy.

There is also a chance that a study released this week by University of Victoria climate professor Andre persuade the EU not to vilify Canadian oil. Dr. Weaver, who is well-known for his stance against man- has been heavily involved in UN research on carbon emissions, has calculated that extracting and burr reserves — 170 billion barrels, the second-largest reserve on the planet — would only increase global t C and 0.05 C over the next 50 years. The 'sands are hardly "the biggest carbon bomb on the planet," as scientist, NASA's James Hansen, has claimed.

Dr. Weaver and his co-author, Neil Swart, do not claim there will be no environmental impact on wild but since the EU's big concern is the oil sands' contribution to global warming, perhaps their research oil-hungry Europe to ease up a bit.