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Keystone XL opponents express climate, spill concerns as commenting period ends

Sharon Abercrombie | Mar. 11, 2014 Eco Catholic

The U.S. State Department will begin this week tapping into the deluge of feedback that has poured in during its final public comment period regarding the construction of the northern segment of the Keystone XL transnational pipeline.

The controversial project, if approved by President Barack Obama within the next few months, would stretch nearly 1,700 miles and transport more than 800,000 barrels of oil per day from the Canadian tar sands in Alberta through six states en route to Gulf refineries in Texas.

Along the way, the proposed northern section of the path (about 1,100 miles) would cross the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, as well as key sources of drinking and agricultural water, such as the Ogallala aquifer, which covers nearly all of Nebraska and portions of seven other states. The southern portion, which did not require State Department approval since it did not cross an international border, is already constructed and began shipping oil in January.

At the end of January, the State Department released its final environmental risk report, concluding [1] that rejecting the pipeline would do little to impede the oil sands' emissions. As the final deadline for comments on the report approached Friday, environmental and religious organizations reminded their members to join the chorus of pipeline opponents.

The Sierra Club alone contributed more than 200,000 comments*, telling the president that approving Keystone is not in the nation?s interest.

In addition, the national religious environmental group Interfaith Power and Light released a letter [2] to Obama signed by 175 religious leaders and more than 6,000 people of faith, urging him to reject the pipeline?s final phase of construction and consider God?s creation as he weighs the decision.

?Instead commit our nation to leading the global clean energy revolution,? the letter said.

NCR spoke to two of the more than dozen Catholic women religious among the signers: Franciscan Sr. Joan Brown, of Rochester, Minn., the executive director of Interfaith Power and Light of New Mexico and head of the Albuquerque-based retreat center Partnership for Earth Spirituality; and Mercy Sr. Marlene Perrotte, treasurer of the partnership.

?A lot of people here in New Mexico are really concerned about this pipeline, because of its link to climate change,? Brow said, emphasizing that Canadian tar sands oil is considered a dirtier oil than other crudes. Studies have suggested tar sands oil can emit [3] 20 percent more carbon emissions than conventional oil.

Tar sands extraction methods use ?huge amounts of water,? too, she added, an indulgence the world can ill

afford in these times of increasing water scarcity.

Brown worries that the environmental destruction, which has attacked ancient Boreal forests in Alberta tar sands territory, could also ruin similarly pristine lands along in the U.S. route.

Kansas immediately comes to mind, she said. A leak in the pipeline could imperil the state?s precious bluestem prairies of the Flint Hills region. These grasses withstand drought, prevent soil erosion and serve as cattle fodder.

Brown grew up on a farm in Olpe, Kan. She has been close to the earth all of her life. Seasonal rituals at her childhood parish, St. Joseph Church, deepened the connection.

?We had the blessing of seeds on Rogation Days. In November we would process to the cemetery to honor the ancestors,? she said.

Brown told *NCR* that it is up to the religious community to ?take the moral high ground? and continue to speak out against the pipeline. She said Pope Francis? statements linking together the moral imperative to address climate change, care for creation and the economy encourage her.

?Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement,? Francis said in his apostolic exhortation *Evangeli Gadium [4]*. ?Let us not leave in our wake a swatch of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations.?

In January, the pope told the Vatican diplomatic corps [5] that he was reminded of a popular saying concerning the environment: ?God always forgives, we sometimes forgive, but when nature -- creation -- is mistreated, she never forgives!?

Perrotte -- a novice beekeeper and ?an environmentalist forever? -- spoke of the need for Americans to ?put two and two together to get four.? This means remembering some of the special interests behind Keystone, such as the Koch Family, whose Pine Bend refinery in Rosemount, Minn., is among the largest [6] U.S. refineries of Canadian crude oil. Today, Koch Industries is among the largest holders of mineral leases [7] in Alberta, where most of Canadian tar sands deposits are located.

Should the new pipeline be approved, the Mercy sister predicted the six states will indeed face the prospect of serious damage to waterways, wildlife and human health. She cited Enbridge, builder of the Alberta Clipper pipeline. Between 1999 and 2012, the company has seen 804 spills [8] along its pipelines, totaling 6.8 million gallons of oil. That includes the 2010 Kalamazoo River spill [9] -- the largest on-land U.S. oil spill where 800,000 barrels of oil gushed for 17 hours, contaminating 35 miles of the river.

More recently, a 22-foot crack in an Exxon pipeline last April caused a massive tar sands spill into a residential neighborhood [10] of Mayflower, Ark. As for TransCanada spills, its Keystone One pipeline, traveling from Alberta to southern Illinois, saw 11 spills [11] in its first year of operation.

Doing the math truly brings the dangers of the pipeline into focus, Perrotte said.

The anxieties of Perrotte and Brown themselves have spilled over into some of their prayers and rituals at the Environmental Partnership gatherings. At a recent service of lamentations for the earth and those affected by the pipeline, they pleaded for the president ?to uphold your promise to fight climate change and oppose Keystone XL, and to not sacrifice climate change for short-term profiteering by Big Oil Companies.?

Should more than pleas be needed, Brown has already determined the next course of action. She is among the nearly 87,000 people who have signed a pledge of resistance [12] to participate in acts of peaceful civil disobedience as Obama reviews the project.

[**Editor's Note**: *This article has been revised to clarify the amount of comments from the Sierra Club on the State Department final environmental risk report. The organization contributed more than 200,000 to the two million -plus comments submitted in opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline.*]

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