

# As odds grow long, opponents move to stop pipeline

As odds grow longer, unusual coalition prepares for final battle to stop Keystone pipeline

By Thomas Beaumont | Associated Press – Mon, Mar 18, 2013



Associated Press - In this photo taken on March 11, 2013, sisters Jenni Harrington, left, and Abbi Kleinschmidt stand next to the proposed route of the Keystone XL pipeline on the property of Jenni Harrington near Bradshaw, Neb. An unusual coalition of environmentalists, property rights advocates and ranchers is attempting to find new ways to derail the Keystone XL pipeline project that, more than ever, seems to be headed for approval in a nation eager for jobs and energy development. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik)

MARTELL, Neb. (AP) -- With a sense of grim determination, a group of unlikely allies has begun gathering at kitchen tables, in churches and along fence rows here to plot what could be the final battle in the four-year conflict over the Keystone XL pipeline.

After months of quiet, a recent State Department report dismissing the ecological impact of the pipeline has cleared the way for a final decision on the plan for transporting oil extracted from the Alberta tar sands more than 1,700 miles to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast.

An unusual coalition of environmentalists, property rights advocates and ranchers is now attempting to find new ways to derail a project that, more than ever, seems to be headed for approval in a nation eager for jobs and energy development.

"It's been four very long, very difficult years," said one of the opposition's chief organizers, Jane Kleeb of Hastings.

But the group is buoyed by its success so far in stalling the project and in bringing so many disparate interests into the fight.

"I'm associated with people I never dreamed I would have been associated with," said Randy Thompson, a Nebraska rancher and self-described conservative Republican, at a meeting of activists at his rural home south of Lincoln. "There's a stigma on people considered environmentalists. I had that concept."

The opposition effort is now focused on the new Secretary of State, John Kerry, who will make a recommendation to President Barack Obama on whether to green-light the project. The previous Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was believed to favor the plan before it was stalled by objections over the route.

Opponents and supporters will face off at public hearing in Nebraska, expected to be held in the spring.

Company officials with TransCanada, the pipeline builder, said they are confident they have enough public support along the pipeline's seven-state route, further bolstered by the favorable environmental impact report, to get clearance to begin.

"The sooner we get clarity on schedule, the sooner we can put these people to work," said TransCanada spokesman James Miller.

The politics surrounding the pipeline have changed since last spring when the administration slowed the approval process because of the local protests. At the time, Nebraska's Republican Gov. Dave Heineman objected to the pipeline's route through the ecological sensitive Sand Hills area.

But Heineman was mollified after the company moved the pipeline's route further east. Both Democratic and Republican officials in the affected states, plus business and labor interests, now largely support the project because of the estimated 13,000 construction jobs it will create during the two years of construction.

"It creates jobs and increases our nation's energy supply," said Nebraska Sen. Mike Johanns. "There is no reason for President Obama or the State Department to delay a project that is so clearly in the nation's best interest."

The pipeline would transport up to 800,000 barrels of oil per day to Gulf Coast and Midwest refineries, much of it for export. Advocates contend the pipeline would be more energy efficient than transporting the oil by truck or rail.

But the opponents, especially those in Nebraska, are organized and politically diverse. Hundreds of ranchers and landowners have challenged the idea of a foreign-based corporation seizing land in the United States.

"No foreign corporation should ever be able to come through and take your property without a permit," said Susan Dunavan, who owns 80 acres of native prairie in southeast Nebraska and is a conservative Republican.

Meanwhile, Abbi Kleinschmidt and Jenni Harrington, who are liberal Democrats with a family farm on the pipeline route near Benedict, complain that a pipeline would undercut the fight against global warming.

"It's about awareness and acceptance of climate change," Sierra Club lawyer Ken Winston, of Lincoln.

Other landowners also worry about risks to the Ogalala aquifer, the vast underground shallow water table that is the state's primary water source.

Opponents have been approaching landowners to persuade them not to accept TransCanada's money to allow access. They are also holding meetings in towns along the route, airing television ads, mailing letters to the White House and trying to meet with members of Congress.

Last week, opponents who met at Thompson's house discussed the possibility of protesting the new route because it crosses land thought to contain Ponca Indian artifacts.

The variety of people in the group helps in brainstorming the campaign, they said.

"Being brought together really opened people's eyes. We're all more similar than we may have thought," said Zack Hamilton, a thick-bearded organic farmer.

But the obstacles to success have grown since the State Department's draft report on March 1 finding no evidence the pipeline would have significant environmental impact along its 1,700-mile run.

"We're going to fight this, to the very end if we have to," Thompson said.

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Matthew Daly contributed from Washington.