

Op-Ed: Keystone XL — Getting to the Heart(land) of the Matter

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Those of you who know me (and probably many who do not, considering my propensity to parade about in Husker apparel) know that I am from Nebraska. Go ahead; smirk a little bit about that vast, nebulous, unsophisticated, middle-of-nowhere part of the country. It's okay. I get that a lot. Nebraska is pretty far away, and like much of the Midwest, it is full of corn, and it's mostly conservative. Mostly. Lincoln and Omaha both have Democratic mayors, and Obama actually got an electoral vote from Omaha in the 2008 election. On the other hand, in the 2012 presidential election, all but one county went for Mitt Romney. In the same election, we lost our only Democrat elected to national office. Mississippi currently has more Democrats in Congress.

Still though, there are a few things that have consistently united Nebraskans across party lines over the past few years. One of them is the Nebraska Huskers' failure to bring home a national championship since 1998. Nothing brings a state together in a sense of collective mourning like a once great, now mediocre college football team. (Still doing better than Mississippi, though. So at least there's that.)

But the other issue that has brought together Nebraskans of all political persuasions is their opposition to the Keystone XL oil pipeline. Now, I know what you're thinking. Give me a break. Haven't you been paying attention? Everyone knows that this is about big oil interests versus global warming advocates, i.e. Republicans versus Democrats. And on a national level, you're right to think that. Most national newspapers have run articles about how the tar sands oil refineries emit huge amounts of pollution, but that America desperately needs jobs and to reduce dependence on unfriendly foreign oil. I'm sure we can find Chris Matthews and Bill O'Reilly screaming about it somewhere on the internet.

But that's not the whole story. While it's true that at a national level the debate has divided along party lines, back home the perspective is very different. In fact, the opposition to the pipeline is and always has been a movement that crossed party lines. Though it may seem ridiculous, given the enormously politicized nature of this issue at a national level, the first resistance to Keystone XL came from a bipartisan coalition of environmentalists and rural conservatives. In Nebraska. Opposition to the pipeline has been growing in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Montana, and Texas for years. In Nebraska especially, a movement developed that largely transcended political affiliation, including liberal environmental organizations such as The Sierra Club, National Wildlife Foundation, and 350.org, local political organizations such as Bold Nebraska, rural organizations such as the Nebraska Farmers Union, and a largely conservative collection of ranchers and farmers.

Though all of these factions became involved through different means, they have united behind several key issues. The first is the initial pipeline route proposed by TransCanada. Originally, Keystone XL would have traversed the Sandhills, an extremely environmentally fragile region in the northwest part of the state. The Sandhills got their name because they are literally hills of sand, covered by a very thin layer of topsoil. Disturbing this topsoil would allow the sand to be exposed and blown away, causing massive erosion. Digging a route for the pipeline in this region would be hugely destructive to the ecosystem. The danger is compounded by the presence of the Ogallala Aquifer in the region. The aquifer, which lies beneath most of Nebraska, provides irrigation and drinking water for the entire state. The pipeline was slated to pass just southwest of Lincoln, about a twenty minute drive from my house. A leak there could contaminate the water supply with tar sands oil all the smaller towns and farms in the area. If the pipeline leaked somewhere near where Omaha-Council Bluffs and Lincoln pump their water—the new proposed route has it crossing the Platte River, not far upstream from the water wells—up to half a million people could be affected. This is without taking into account the farmers and ranchers throughout the state who depend on the groundwater to grow crops and feed their livestock. A leak anywhere along the pipeline, even a small one, could be devastating for everyone in the community.

The second major issue that sparked outrage in Nebraska was the way in which TransCanada went about acquiring the land in the path of the pipeline. TransCanada began contacting landowners back in 2008 and 2009 to acquire land for the proposed Keystone XL project. Landowners would receive a letter informing them that their land was in the path of the pipeline, and would be offered a financial reward for giving up their rights to the land. If the landowner refused, TransCanada threatened to seize their land under eminent domain and the landowner would be paid after an assessment of the property. Not only was the legality of this questionable (it is unclear that TransCanada had the right

to claim eminent domain before a pipeline was officially approved), but TransCanada would continually harass landowners with letters and visits until they agreed to a deal. Most eventually did sign, but TransCanada's actions left a deep resentment across the state. As Ben Gotschall, Energy Director for Bold Nebraska, a local group committed to "restoring political balance", and one of the early groups opposed to the pipeline, put it, "[The landowners] were not vocal, were not active, but they were pissed off." It was only after a few landowners refused to give up the rights to their property (in 2009 and 2010) that the coalition was formed and the movement began.

Initially, the coalition formed around these two issues, but it did not stop there. When it was revealed in 2010 that the governor and attorney general were taking campaign donations from TransCanada, the public outcry was so great that both men actually returned the money. At this point, the issue had become much larger than either property rights or environmental concerns. "It's a climate issue, property rights issue, groundwater issue, land use issue, campaign finance issue, environmental issue, eminent domain issue," said Mr. Gotschall, "You need people passionate about all of the reasons, and to explain how their reason and perspective fits into the overall puzzle."

But at a national level, this bipartisan, grassroots campaign is not the only thing to be discarded and forgotten. Since coming to the East Coast, I have noticed that in addition to the highly politicized nature of the debate, the consensus is that the pipeline fight began in the summer 2011. Although this may mark the beginning of widespread opposition to the pipeline at a national level, discontent has been growing in the Midwest since 2008. The Washington DC rallies in the late summer and fall of 2011 represented the culmination of the movement, not the beginning. The rise of the opposition to the national stage was the result of years of work on the part of local groups directly in the path of the pipeline. But this work has been largely dismissed, even though without the years of cooperation between local environmental advocates and rural conservatives, the issue would never have reached Washington.

To me, this dismissal is insulting at best, and counterproductive at worst. By ignoring the huge contributions of local activists, national pipeline opponents have written off the very real concerns of people directly in the path of the pipeline. In addition, by making climate change the focus of the debate, national adversaries of the pipeline have made the opposition easier to dismiss. In turning it into a single-issue movement, opponents have cut off other angles of attack; angles which successfully turned a Republican-dominated state against the pipeline.

Which brings me to my final point. Here at Swarthmore, we're always encouraged to think about big ideas and big solutions. The only problem is that sometimes, we forget that big ideas are made up of many different smaller ideas, each with their own merits and each with their own power. The fight against TransCanada and the Keystone XL pipeline is no different. This is not a battle that can be won on the climate change argument alone. Certainly it is an important aspect, but alone it will not be enough to stop TransCanada from putting a pipeline down the middle of the country. This movement is not and has never been a single-issue movement. It ascended to the national stage precisely because people of all political persuasions objected to it on many different levels; concerns about groundwater pollution, property rights, and campaign finance reform, to name just a few. If activists at Swarthmore (and throughout the country as a whole) truly want to stop this pipeline, they need to create a politically transcendent, populist movement. And they won't find a better model than the one currently working to keep the pipeline out of Nebraska.

Op-ED by Eve DiMagno '15



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