

NEBRASKA: TAR SANDS XL PIPELINE ENDANGERS OGALLALA AQUIFER



The Canadian company that wants to build an oil pipeline through six states has increased its lobbying spending in both Lincoln, Neb., and Washington, D.C., as environmentalists step up protests in both capitals.

TransCanada Corp. spent nearly \$23,500 in the third quarter this year in Nebraska on lobbying, more than any three-month period since July 2008, which was around time the company filed its permit with the U.S. State Department for the cross-border pipeline.

The total is a pittance compared to what the Calgary, Alberta-based company has spent on lobbyists in Washington, but the Cornhusker state could become a major problem for the pipeline.

Nebraska lawmakers kicked off a special session to debate the route of the Keystone XL pipeline on Tuesday, and will be considering proposals on the issue until Thanksgiving.

The project requires State Department approval, but President Barack Obama said he would personally decide on whether the project should go forward. Even if Obama gives it the green light, state lawmakers could delay the project for years by forcing TransCanada to reroute the Nebraska portion.

The company has greatly increased its Washington lobbying. Led by Paul Elliott, former deputy director of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's failed 2008 presidential campaign, the company's spending went from \$190,000 in 2008 to \$720,000 in 2010, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Its 2011 total for the first three quarters has already surpassed last year, at \$1.3 million.

Opponents of the project are returning to the White House on Sunday because they say the project would endanger ground water in the Midwest and increase global warming. A two-week long sit-in outside 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue at the end of August led to the arrest of 1,254 protesters.

The proposed \$7 billion, 1,702-mile long international pipeline extension would connect the massive tar sands deposits of central Alberta with oil refineries on the Texas coast.

But the pipeline has to cut across the center of the U.S. and through more than 100 miles of Nebraska's Ogallala aquifer. The massive underground formation provides drinking water for some 2.9 million Americans and sustains more than a quarter of the nation's agricultural production.

The danger that the 800,000 barrel-per-day oil pipeline may leak has stirred up opposition from many farmers, ranchers and environmentalists in the solidly conservative state. One section of TransCanada's tar sands pipeline project , though new, has leaked 12 times, as six senators noted in a July letter to Clinton . The leaky Keystone I pipeline, which stretches 1,853 miles from Hardisty, Alberta, to Patoka, Ill., only went into operation in June 2010.

To assuage concerns, TransCanada has offered a \$100 million oil spill bond in Nebraska. Pipeline supporters say the Keystone XL will be safe and create thousands of high-paying union jobs. The company argues that forcing a route change at this point would be illegal.

Nebraska's Republican governor, Dave Heineman, convened a special session of the state's 49 senators in Lincoln to discuss "alternative solutions" to the pipeline route, according to a statement . "We are committed to protecting Nebraska's most valuable resource – its water."

Heineman has said he is not opposed to the pipeline, just its route.

Climate activists note that refining fuel from Canada's viscous oil sands, as they're also known, releases around three times more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than from conventional crude, according to research from the University of Ottawa. Carbon dioxide emissions are the leading driver of climate change.

Canadian oil sands-mining also removes vast swaths of carbon-absorbing boreal forests and leaves behind giant lakes of toxic tailings that can be deadly to migrating birds.

Opponents of the pipeline claim the State Department's evaluation of the pipeline's impact has understated these environmental risks. Members of Congress responded to activists' concerns by calling for the agency's inspector general to investigate the review process, which was reportedly conducted by one State Department employee who lacked any scientific background with the assistance of a contractor financially linked to TransCanada.

Source: <http://www.publicherald.org/archives/14100/investigative-reports/water-series-investigations/>