

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 8, 2011 at 11:23am

Keystone XL debate's plotline thickens

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Eco Catholic

The pro-environmental plotline thickens. And it's good news all around.

On Nov. 6, an estimated 12,000 protesters encircled the White House, urging President Obama to reject the proposed Keystone XL, a 1,700-mile oil pipeline that would stretch from Canada to Texas.

Among the numerous ecological objections to Keystone XL: If it were to leak, the pipeline could poison the 174,000-square-mile Ogallala Aquifer, which supplies drinking water to roughly two million people in the American heartland, reports the Huffington Post.

Meanwhile, as environmentalists rallied in D.C., several news sources and an independent labor study revealed that TransCanada, Keystone's owner, has exaggerated the number of jobs the project would create.

Earlier reports were touting 20,000. Turns out that's not exactly the case.

A Nov. 5 Washington Post story calls it a fabrication supported by misleading mathematics. And what about those 250,000 indirect jobs? This is a number based on one study funded by the oil industry that counted jobs for dancers, choreographers and speech therapists.

"Thank heavens some reporter actually questioned this jobs number, instead of just repeating it," said environmental activist Bill McKibben, organizer of Sunday's Tar Sands Action protest against Keystone XL.

Said McKibben: "The only study not paid for by the pipeline company makes clear that there are no net jobs from this pipeline because it will kill as many as it will create."

Meanwhile, Huffington Post reporter Tom Zeller Jr. has reported that the pipeline company included expenditures on the Canadian side of the border, and included "tens of thousands of indirect jobs in retail, printing and publishing, and other ancillary industries that would spring up." TransCanada chief executive Russ Girling said the 13,000 construction jobs figure was "one person, one year," meaning that if the construction jobs lasted two years, the number of people employed would be only 6,500.

Information concerning manufacturing jobs also turned out to be misleading. The company has already purchased \$1.9 billion on pipe and other materials. Of money still to be spent, said a Tar Sands Action online report, "at least \$1.7 billion worth of steel will be purchased from a Russian-owned mill in Canada," said the Huffington Post.

CARE2, a northern California online news and petition site, has reported that a Cornell University Global Institute study, the only one not funded by TransCanada, concluded that any jobs stemming from the pipeline's construction were likely to be outweighed by the environmental damage it would cause, along with a possible rise in Midwest gasoline prices because a new pipeline would divert that region's oversupply of oil to the Gulf Coast.

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As if these revelations are not enough to cause major migraines for TransCanada executives, former employees and several union representatives spoke out against the pipeline at Sunday's rally.

John Bolenbaugh, a former Keystone employee, came to the protest from his Michigan home. He served as a spill cleanup worker for an Enbridge Energy Partners' spill on the Kalamazoo River in Michigan. He said the risks involved in building another pipeline are just not worth it.

"I'm a union worker," he said. "I work for Pipefitters 355 in Battle Creek, Michigan, and I will not accept a job for a tar sands pipeline. I will not do it because I've seen the devastation and the sick people from what a tar sands spill does when there is a leak, and there's gonna be a leak. It's gonna happen sooner or later."

Labor leaders are also speaking out against the pipeline. James C. Little, president of the Transport Workers Union, and Larry J. Hanley, president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, organizations representing more than 300,000 U.S. workers, issued a joint statement last Friday opposing the approval of the proposed pipeline:

"We call on the State Department NOT to approve the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline or to take any actions that lead to the further extraction of Tar Sands oil from Alberta, Canada.

We share The Environmental Protection Agency's concerns conveyed to the State Department on two occasions, most recently June 11, 2011. These concerns cover the potential impacts to groundwater resources from pipeline spills, the high levels of GHG emissions associated with the proposed project, and the inevitable damage to the health of communities affected by the increase in refinery emissions. Approval of this project at this time would therefore be reckless given the EPA's own assessment of the environmental risk."

Little and Hanley's final paragraph contains treasures of wisdom that reveal that ecological consciousness is expanding.

"We need jobs but not ones based on increasing our reliance on Tar Sands oil," they write. "There is no shortage of water and sewage pipelines that need to be fixed or replaced, bridges and tunnels that are in need of emergency repair, transportation infrastructure that needs to be renewed and developed. Many jobs could also be created in energy conservation, upgrading the grid, maintaining and expanding public transportation ? jobs that can help us reduce air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and improve energy efficiency."

May the good news stream continue.

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