

Resist the pipeline and find a new, greener way

NCR Editorial Staff | Jan. 27, 2012

The Obama administration rightfully rejected the controversial Keystone XL oil pipeline. Congressional Republicans had given the president a Feb. 21 deadline to either green light the TransCanada Corporation's proposal, or determine the project is not in the national interest. If built, the 1,700-mile-long conduit would run from Western Canada's tar sands areas across our border into the Dakotas and head south to Texas refineries.

President Barack Obama said Jan. 18 that the February deadline made it impossible to adequately evaluate the project. He did allow that a new proposal might pass the review process, and pipeline supporters vowed to press for its approval. We urge the president to continue to resist the petroleum industry, construction unions and the Canadian government.

Critics are piling on. Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney said: "If Americans want to understand why unemployment in the United States has been stuck above 8 percent for the longest stretch since the Great Depression, decisions like this one are the place to begin." Republican House Speaker John Boehner said the president sold out, and "won't stand up to his political base even in the name of creating American jobs." You will hear a lot about the jobs the pipeline would create, but those projections are hugely overblown.

The pipeline promises to be a key defining issue in an ongoing election-year fight. More importantly it could be a defining issue in the future of our planet. Some will dismiss this as hyperbole. We don't.

Environmentalists say the pipeline would drive increased destruction of the continent's northern forests, boost greenhouse gas emissions, raise pump prices and lock us into the extracting and refining of bitumen in tar sands, source of the planet's filthiest oil, for decades to come.

Many Kansas and Nebraska residents, including Nebraska's governor and state representatives, oppose the pipeline because it would traverse the Ogallala Aquifer, the main source of drinking water in the Upper Midwest, and threaten the beautiful and sensitive Sand Hills area. Haunted by the 2010 Gulf oil spill, many worry about a leak that could have disastrous consequences in local areas.

But the danger runs much deeper.

Activist Bill McKibben, who in 1989 wrote the first popular book about global climate change, *The End of Nature*, reported being startled by a remark made to him by James Hansen, one of the world's leading climate scientists. McKibben asked: "The pipeline will support and extend the extraction of exceptionally dirty crude oil from bitumen, using huge amounts of water and heat, which would then be piped to refineries and eventually consumed as fuel, releasing a vast new volume of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. What will the effect of all this be on the world's climate?"

Hansen replied: "Essentially, it's game over for the planet."

The danger of the pipeline is that it keeps us on the path of avoiding the fresh thinking that could move us to a

new, greener future.

Ninety percent of Americans say developing sources of clean energy should be a high priority for the president and Congress, according to a November survey by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication. A majority of small-business owners believe clean energy legislation will strengthen the economy, says a poll by American Viewpoint. Obama's commitment to clean energy was clear in his State of the Union address Jan. 25, and his statement, "We don't have to choose between our environment and our economy," is very reasonable.

For nearly all the thousands of ways we use energy, there is technology, know-how and ingenuity to use less. A continued emphasis on higher efficiency standards for cars and trucks, investing in biofuels, in wind and solar, together with widespread conservation measures -- all can greatly benefit workers and businesses, without the risk to the health and safety of people and the environment that the Keystone pipeline represents.

Bishop Luc Bouchard of Alberta's St. Paul diocese, where the heart of Canada's tar sands industry is located, wrote a pastoral letter in 2009, "The Integrity of Creation and the Athabasca Oil Sands," challenging the moral legitimacy of the project. In an August 2011 interview with Catholic News Service, Bouchard questioned the morality of exploiting the oil fields because of the danger posed to indigenous people and the environment. He said he doubted that oil mining made necessary by the pursuit of profit and to satisfy a consumer lifestyle was worth the risk of enhancing climate change.

We have the moral foundation, the public support and the technology to curtail the environmental disaster that the Keystone pipeline represents. We must now find the political will.

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