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Report: Keystone XL pipeline adds little environmental risk

by Brian Roewe

Eco Catholic

The much-debated Keystone XL pipeline would pose little additional environmental risk, according to a State Department report released Friday on the proposed project.

The report, called the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, concluded, based on a market analysis, whether the pipeline is built or not the demand for the oil would likely remain.

"Approval or denial of any one crude oil transport project, including the proposed Project, is unlikely to significantly impact the rate of extraction in the oil sands or the continued demand for heavy crude oil at refineries in the United States based on expected oil prices, oil-sands supply costs, transport costs, and supply-demand scenarios," the report stated.

The report did acknowledge that the oil from the tar sands is "generally more [greenhouse gas] intensive than other heavy crudes they would replace or displace in U.S. refineries, and emit an estimated 17 percent more GHGs on a lifecycle basis than the average barrel of crude oil refined in the United States in 2005."

The project is estimated to emit approximately .24 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents annually during the construction phases, and anywhere from 1.3 million to 27.4 million metric tons annually throughout the project's total lifecycle. The latter figure would be the equivalent of the annual carbon emissions from 5.7 million cars or more than 1.3 million homes.

The pipeline, if built in full by TransCanada, would form a spine down the center of the U.S., traversing nearly 1,700 miles, carrying 830,000 barrels of crude oil from the Alberta tar sands in Canada to its

refineries in the Gulf of Mexico, crossing six states along the way. The southern portion of the pipeline, already constructed, began shipping oil from Oklahoma to the Gulf earlier this month.

Pipeline supporters have pointed to the pipeline adding to the U.S. energy portfolio as well as jobs, while opponents have emphasized the environmental impact and has questioned how many jobs, particularly long-term positions, it would actually create.

The State Department noted that the report does not provide a decision one way or the other on the project, but rather an assessment for state officials and the president to consider among other factors. A commenting period opens Feb. 5 and closes March 7.

At that point, the department, led by Secretary John Kerry, must determine how the pipeline would serve national interests, and consult with at least eight agencies ? the Departments of Defense, Justice, Interior, Commerce, Transportation, Energy, Homeland Security, and Environmental Protection Agency. From there, the department makes its recommendation to President Barack Obama, who will make the final decision.

That ruling is not expected for months.

In the meantime, a document yet to be released is expected to provide insights into whether a primary contractor to the impact statement had a conflict of interest due to its ties to TransCanada. The Inspector General of the State Department, who conducted the report, told *The Washington Post* that its report would not come out Friday.

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Reaction to the impact statement was resigned among environmental groups, who have singled out the pipeline as a line-in-the-sand issue on addressing climate change. A year ago in February, more than 35,000 people assembled in Washington to call for meaningful movement to address climate change, including a rejection of Keystone.

The grassroots climate group 350.org, one of the primary organizers of the rally, has pledged to ramp up its pressure on the president to reject Keystone while the State Department begins its review. It has planned nationwide rallies for Monday, and says that more than 80,000 people have committed to civil disobedience should the pipeline's approval appear likely.

"The fight against Keystone XL has put more people in the streets and sent more people to jail than any other environmental issue in a generation," its executive director May Boeve said in a statement. "We're entering the fourth quarter with a sense of momentum and determination. We're determined to win this thing and we're willing to hit hard to do it."

Though disappointed with the report's overall conclusions, some noted that the assessment recognized that the tar sands oil

"Even though the State Department continues to downplay clear evidence that the Keystone XL pipeline would lead to tar sands expansion and significantly worsen carbon pollution, it has, for the first time, acknowledged that the proposed project could accelerate climate change. President Obama now has all the information he needs to reject the pipeline," said Susan Casey-Lefkowitz, international director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The American Petroleum Institute welcomed the impact statement, the fifth such assessment of the project in the last five years.

"This final review puts to rest any credible concerns about the pipeline's potential negative impact on the environment. This long awaited project should now be swiftly approved," said Jack Gerard, the institute's president.

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

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