

COLUMNIST

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What could go wrong?

Will a new pipeline run through Arkansas?

November 22, 2016 Ark Dem-Gaz pg 6B

The power of publicity is sometimes proven more by its absence than by its presence. One example of publicity silence in Arkansas is the fact a 20-inch diameter crude oil pipeline with 200,000-barrels-per-day capacity is being built across 440 miles, slicing from just south of Fort Smith to the Valero refinery in Memphis. Since Arkansas law does not require citizen opinion to be heard on issues like this, few people statewide are aware of this huge project. Information about the Diamond Pipeline started slowly leaking out in 2014, but no one thought much about it in those days of low oil prices. Its path was not certain, and it was mostly reported as business news. Also, the many stark realities about pipelines were not being discussed much in the media after Keystone's northern route was stalled, and the Dakota Access pipeline confrontation with the Standing Rock Sioux tribe had not begun. Then this August after the Plains All American and Valero Energy companies got a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to go ahead with their \$900 million plans, the Arkansas Public Service Commission seconded the motion. Oil companies, of course, always say they want to be good neighbors, but do you remember being asked by them or by our state leaders if you as an Arkansas citizen also approve of this venture? No, you weren't asked because private pipeline companies have been deemed "common carriers," treated as utilities, and granted the power of eminent domain for their rights-of-way across private lands. They don't ask; they tell. And, private property falls to corporate use. This particular pipeline originates in the shaky town of Cushing, Okla., home of the largest tank farm in the world (46.3 million barrels capacity) and the nation's crossroad of oil transfer routes. The danger of that amount of crude sitting in close proximity to the epicenters of the recent 5.5 and 5.0 magnitude earthquakes felt here and in numerous states is chilling. So far only dumb luck can account for dodged disasters under those tanks, and if Oklahoma continues to allow disposal well injections to shake up their state and ours, the odds are pretty high a pipeline break is in our future. What else is at risk when oil spills? This snaking line will cross an estimated 400 to 500 waterways and at least five major rivers: the Arkansas, the Illinois Bayou, the White, the St. Francis, and the Mississippi. Wildlife refuges and management areas span much of eastern Arkansas and

are habitat of both rare and endangered bats, mussels, birds, plants, etc. Natural areas like the Big Woods are home to 260 bird species, 100 species of fish and the oldest and largest living things in Arkansas, 1,000-year-old cypress trees. Probably more interesting to hunters and the state's economy are the 300,000 ducks and multitudes of geese that migrate to this area each year. Imagine an oil spill in these wetlands and forests. Clean-up will be almost impossible, and toxic oil can kill ecosystems for miles, destroying freshwater sources for animals and humans alike. Quinn Montana, an environmental scientist and researcher, has compiled an impressive listing of what is in the pipe pathway through 14 counties: 10 critically endangered species, nine watersheds, approximately 13 river crossings, five heritage crossings (e.g., Trail of Tears), five counties with at-risk wildlife areas, four state parks/campsites, four priority watersheds, three counties with forest and waterway conservation areas, three Audubon bird prioritization areas, and countless homes and farms. Add the earthquake-prone New Madrid fault near Memphis and the Mississippi River into that mix as well. Opponents often say, "All pipelines leak," and these are accidents waiting to happen. They have good reason. Extensive citizen experience with human error, health impacts, shoddy pipeline materials and workmanship, political pay-offs, corporate greed, and Mother Nature's desire to rid herself of her human pests certainly should have taught us something. This time-lapse video of major failures speaks for itself: <http://www.treehugger.com/fossil-fuels/video-shows-everyoil-pipeline-spill-us-1986.html> Are the trade-offs worth the risks? Since the planet is heating at an alarming rate and climate scientists tell us we must stop burning fossil fuel, why are we still drilling, transporting and burning the stuff? There are alternatives if only we have the will to avoid environmental suicide. The "Stop the Diamond Pipeline #SDP" on Facebook is one reference location (click "Discussion") about this issue (as well as Dakota Access information). There are actions being planned. -----v-----

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