

Guest Editorial

David Kyler: Pipelines must be strictly regulated

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In 2015 the Georgia Department of Transportation exercised its authority under state law by denying “certification” for the proposed Palmetto Pipeline, a 210-mile project crossing Georgia, from South Carolina to Florida. According to the project application submitted to DOT, the Palmetto pipeline was intended to convey liquid petroleum products from a pipeline in South Carolina to Jacksonville. There had never been any supply shortages in coastal Georgia, nor were any expected.

The DOT certification would have empowered the pipeline builder, Kinder Morgan (KM), to cross private land, compensating property owners at market value for the land taken. DOT’s denial was based on the conclusion that KM had failed to demonstrate “public convenience and necessity” required to justify crossing private land.

Later last year, DOT’s decision was upheld in state court when KM challenged it. Hundreds of individuals and organizations opposing the environmentally risky pipeline were gratified by both DOT’s denial and the supportive court decision. All recognized that the project could still be built by only using public land – including dangerously vulnerable state river bottoms and wetlands.

Then the 2016 General Assembly enacted a one-year moratorium on petroleum pipelines in Georgia, establishing a study committee to reconsider requirements for regulating such projects. The study committee is expected to meet for the first time within 60 days.

Given the serious threats of a pipeline leak to sensitive and vitally important resources, including the Floridan aquifer, at the Center for a Sustainable Coast, we firmly believe that state standards for justifying such risks must be uniformly high and extremely well enforced.

As evidenced by thousands of pipeline ‘accidents’ in the past decade, oil pipelines are notorious for leaking, and though they often feature emergency shut-off valves to limit the damage, a slow leak may go undetected, allowing hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil to seep into the surrounding landscape before being discovered. Just such an event occurred in South Carolina in 2015, resulting in the contamination of hundreds of acres of wetlands that may remain impaired for decades, as well as risking untold damage to underlying groundwater supplies.

Accordingly, we can see no reason to have differing standards for crossing public and private lands. Protecting coastal resources is surely of equal value regardless of the

ownership status of areas suffering exposure to damage.

Justification for such projects is made even more doubtful by the ongoing glut of global oil supplies as well as the little known fact that the U.S. – in spite of claims of needing to secure “energy independence” – has become one of the world’s largest oil exporters.

How can we justify putting our coastal rivers, wetlands, fisheries, and water supplies at risk to indulge the profit motives of oil exporters? Equally perplexing, how can we possibly allow more lenient standards for such pipelines when proposing to cross public lands than applied when they transect privately owned areas?

We urge all concerned citizens to tell study committee legislators that the strictest possible requirements must apply when considering pipeline projects in Georgia. Our region deserves reliable safeguards that will uniformly protect our natural resources and quality of life.

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