

Guest Opinion: 'Why They Won't Show Us'

Dr. Cleve Trimble, MD, FACS - Cherry County, Nebraska | Friday, June 15, 2012 12:00 am
(Editor's note: This is the last of a two-part guest editorial)

Yesterday's guest comment ('Just show us the antidote') expressed dismay that neither Nebraska's Department of Health nor its Department of Environmental Quality are aware of the chemical composition of diluents in Keystone XL's heated, pressurized, eventually leaky pipeline.

This information - vital in event of inevitable spills - is withheld by KXL on grounds of being proprietary, a 'trade secret.'

They have unflinchingly subordinated human well-being to their own economic interest, not because others might duplicate the concoction to TransCanada's disadvantage; but because what's in it could, if known, disqualify the project entirely.

A legion of foreign interests would then be disappointed.

KXL's tube of unknown chemicals is intended to course from Canada to the Gulf through North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas; but there has not been demand by a single environmental agency in any of these states to be informed of the goop's composition.

How odd that not one employee of these public watchdogs is curious; perhaps they are under directive from a higher office to appear idle and incompetent.

Yet it is of greater oddity, or coincidence, that each state has similarly partisan governors in an era of lock-step partisan gridlock.

Nebraskans have been forced into a futile discussion about the route, as though there is a difference if KXL leaks in the Sand Hills or a bit to the east.

We know that the Sand Hills are unique and fragile, but conveniently forget that water disperses whatever is in it; that it seeks its own level; and that what happens upstream eventually flows downstream.

Wherever the leaks come, they will occur in somebody's watershed and get into somebody's groundwater; no one in this or any downstream state should ignore these fundamentals. It is not about the Sand Hills: it's about humanity itself.

Dead people require no fuel.

Advocates for KXL often begin their discourses by saying "The environmental impact of our pipeline is well known..." This opener has the clever, salutary effect on listeners who then think, "OK, the environmental stuff has been covered so let's move on to jobs and easements..." But the environmental impact is anything but 'well known.'

Until the exact composition of the diluents is well known we know nothing about the true environmental impact!

Perhaps KXL's 'trade secret' is not adequately protected from economic predation by a patent. If so, KXL still has the duty to fully inform agencies charged with overseeing environmental safety in order that they are prepared for the inevitable spill.

Let these agencies be committed to secrecy by every legal surety; regardless of what it takes, they must know to be able to do their duty to protect our waters and progeny.

But this won't happen, because if Keystone divulges what's in this poisonous slurry, these agencies would be put in the position of a priest who hears the confession of a man who is intent upon a killing spree.

It is the quandary of the confessional: confidentiality becomes moot when prospective victims have to be warned as the higher moral obligation.

This is why Keystone won't tell any of us. This is why they've sold us the word 'proprietary.'

But the greater secret is why our public watchdogs have remained silent; why they are willingly oblivious to having the antidote in hand. If there is one.