

Nebraska Keystone pipeline fighter: 'I wouldn't take \$5-million'

A SHY FARMER TURNED PROTESTER

By NATHAN VANDERKLIPPE
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Jim Tarnick shows the spot where TransCanada wants to build the Keystone XL pipeline near his family ranch in Nebraska on April 26, 2013. Mr. Tarnick is deeply opposed to the project. (Nathan VanderKlippe/The Globe and Mail)

Jim Tarnick is, by nature, a shy man. His answers are forthright, but brief. He doesn't always make eye contact. Sitting next to a large tractor on the family farm near Fullerton, Neb., he is the picture of a quiet farmer.

Then he starts talking about the time he was arrested at the White House and sat in the back of a police van with 350.org founder Bill McKibben and Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune, two of the lions of the clean energy movement. Mr. Tarnick's eyes widen at the memory. A broad smile breaks out.

"I'm a farmer from Nebraska," he says. "And these are guys that are fighting environmental issues" on a global scale. Mr. McKibben, he points out, has been on just about every major news show around. "It was pretty neat, to say the least," to be there "with two people that significant," he says.

Mr. Tarnick lives in the part of Nebraska where people answer a reporter's call with a greeting: "I hear you're a pipeline fighter." Well, no. I'm just a writer.

But there are plenty of pipeline fighters around the state, and Mr. Tarnick is now one of them. His battle against Keystone XL took him to Washington, D.C. – at a \$2,400 cost, including the \$100 in bail he forfeited in a deal to have charges dropped.

He hadn't paid much attention to Keystone XL until last year. Then a neighbour told him the company had published a map of a new route through Nebraska, after its original route through the sensitive Sandhills area stoked such an outpouring of anger that it was denied by the White House.

The new path passes just 150 metres from the house on the Tarnick farm. The right-of-way will occupy a fifth of his land. TransCanada Corp. has also proposed a pump station just across the road, a major development that will take up more than four hectares of a neighbour's land, and produce both noise and a higher risk of spills than the pipe itself.

Mr. Tarnick was worried. He was also confused. TransCanada had chosen the new route to avoid the Sandhills. But the soil around his house is sandy enough that cars wallow on the road. The ditches look like miniature dunes. "We're really sandy here," he says.

The issue is a big one in Nebraska. TransCanada says its new route avoids the Sandhills and protects sensitive areas. Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman approved it. Nebraska's leading Sandhills expert, a retired University of Nebraska hydrogeologist named Jim Goeke who has appeared in TransCanada advertising, agrees. "The eco-region was well-defined" and critics are "just crying wolf," he says.

But environmentalists charge that the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality actually changed the maps on its website – and say the route passes through areas defined as Sandhills on old maps, but not new ones.

What's clear is that the new route is still a path across, and in some cases through, troubled water – in this case, the waters of the Ogallala Aquifer, the giant freshwater reserve that sustains the agricultural heart of the United States. For a 20-kilometre stretch in the Platte River Valley, the new route passes through an area where the water table is just three metres deep, Mr. Goeke says.

On parts of Mr. Tarnick's land, it's less. In spring, the water lies less than a metre from surface. A small linear depression, like a slight ditch, runs across the lawn next to the house. It's barely a third of a metre deep, but filled with water. In wet years, the water stays all summer. "The water table is right up to the top, depending on your area," he says.

There is a question that arises on a long drive down the Keystone XL path: What is so different about Nebraska? On the surface, it bears much in common with Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana and South Dakota – places where support for the pipeline is relatively high. All of these places vote in great numbers for conservative politicians. In all of these places, the route crosses land owned by ranchers and farmers, many of them with 100-year family histories and nearly all of them with similar working lives. They all get up in the dark of night to rescue new calves in a spring blizzard. Cattle and grain prices mean the difference between prosperity and poverty for them all.

But for some reason, Nebraska's ranchers have bitterly fought a pipeline others have accepted. Why?

The reason is obvious, even from the highway. North of the Nebraska state line, the pipe route crosses land that, in the dying days of winter, is arid, dry and seemingly dead. In Nebraska, it's green and alive, a striking change. This is a place watered by the Ogallala, and everyone knows it – not least those who depend on that water. A leak, even if it doesn't spread far, carries the real risk of killing a farm or ranch.

"I don't trust them at all," Mr. Tarnick says. "There's no amount of money that's worth it. They can tell me \$5-million – I wouldn't take it."

But how about the hypocrisy issue? After all, Mr. Tarnick's farm would also die were he unable to fuel his equipment. He says he is persuaded by the argument that some of what's refined out of Keystone XL's oil will be exported. In other words, there's a chance he won't even be able to use that energy.

"I don't believe we're getting any oil out of that for the nation," he says.

He's prepared to risk arrest again, too. If the pipeline construction crews come, he doesn't intend to get out of their way unless he's physically removed.

"I would do everything in my means to block them and stop them," he says.

Reporter Nathan VanderKlippe meets up with some passionate pipeline resisters who vow to continue their battle against TransCanada

The Keystone XL pipeline has brought into sharp relief some of the most pressing economic, political and social issues facing the continent. As a U.S. review on a presidential permit for the project nears its conclusion, reporter Nathan VanderKlippe hopped in a car and drove the pipeline's route to sketch the people and places that stand in its way. This is the fifth part of a week-long series.

Part one: [What I found on my trip along the Keystone route](#)

Part two: [Skeptical artists, multiplying bison and American believers](#)

Part three: ['Praise God! Let the oil flow'](#)

Part four: ['Great white father... we do not want this pipeline'](#)

View a [map of Nathan's journey](#)

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