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Pros and cons of Keystone XL pipeline aired one last time

By [Paul Hammel](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



ALBION, Neb. — Tom Briese had questions about the Keystone XL pipeline when he first learned that the controversial project was being rerouted across his farmland.

Would it disrupt his operation? Would it contaminate the groundwater he pumps for irrigation? Would it be a good deal for him and his community?

In the end, the Albion-area farmer said, he's become a supporter — not only because the nation needs crude oil from Canada and jobs for a sluggish economy — but also because it would deliver \$800,000 or more a year in additional property taxes to the local school district.



Everything has risks, Briese said, but he's convinced that any leaks would cause only local damage and would be outweighed by the benefits.

“The majority of my neighbors in the path of the pipeline agree,” he said.

Briese, who submitted written rather than spoken testimony, was among the dozens of people who lodged their opinions on the crude-oil pipeline during the final public hearing on the project Tuesday night in Albion.

The farm town of 1,800 people in central Nebraska became a major player in the pipeline story after TransCanada Inc. rerouted the high-pressure pipeline to avoid the environmentally sensitive Sand Hills. The new route runs only a couple of miles east of town.

The Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality plans to complete its review of the pipeline around the end of the year, placing the decision in the hands of Gov. Dave Heineman, who has voiced support for the project.

The federal government will have the final say on whether the pipeline is built. The Keystone XL would carry diluted bitumen extracted from tar sand mines in Canada to oil refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

While labor and business organizations echoed many of Briese's comments, others in the standing-room-only crowd at the Boone County Fairgrounds events center didn't agree, including some landowners affected by the project.

They expressed concerns about oil leaks fouling groundwater and ruining farming operations. They said the new route should be rejected because it still crosses sandy and porous soils similar to that in the Sand Hills and doesn't avoid the Ogallala Aquifer.

"Nebraska is an agricultural state, and if the water is contaminated, there's nothing left," said Laura Meusch of rural Stuart.

As she spoke, a 7-year-old boy, Mason Mitchell, laid out 70 toy semitrailer trucks to represent the amount of oil — in full-sized tanker trucks — that could leak each day from the 800,000-barrel-a-day pipeline.

Omaha attorney [Brian Jorde](#), who represents a group of more than 100 landowners, said 40 percent of Nebraska landowners have denied access to TransCanada to even survey a pipeline route across their land.

"The majority of people I talk to want a more intelligent route or don't want (the pipeline) at all," Jorde said.

A frequent request at the hearing was to move the planned route to parallel the existing Keystone pipeline in eastern Nebraska. The rationale is that it would avoid affecting a new set of landowners and cross heavier soils that would contain any leaks.

Corey Goulet, a TransCanada vice president, said the route chosen is the shortest from Canada's tar sand region to a terminal at Steele City, Neb. It's also the safest, he said, because it affects fewer landowners.

The Keystone XL route passes close to North Dakota and its the booming oil fields, which could provide up to 25 percent of the oil shipped on the pipeline, Goulet said. The shortest route also is the least expensive in the \$1 billion project.

Goulet said any leaks would be detected by TransCanada. If there were a spill, it would be small, with consequences "on a local level, not a regional level."

Forces for and against the pipeline held rallies prior to the hearing. Protest signs held by landowners stating "Save My Water" competed with pro-pipeline signs waved by union members touting jobs and energy independence.

"This will mean a lot of work for us," said Joe Acosta of Council Bluffs, one of about 100 members of an Omaha-based laborers union bused to Albion to support the pipeline.

But officials with anti-pipeline groups Bold Nebraska and the Sierra Club said the state review was inadequate. They joined State Sen. Ken Haar of Malcolm in asking for more time for the project to be reviewed.

Ken Winston of the Sierra Club compared the pipeline review to one the Department of Environmental Quality did years earlier on the low-level radioactive waste repository proposed near Butte, Neb., over which the state lost a \$125 million lawsuit.

Winston said the state faces the same potential liability with the pipeline because Heineman has voiced support for it.

Brigham McCown, a former head of the U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, urged the state to approve the project, saying it was the safest way to transport oil.

"Canada is going to produce the oil whether we allow the pipeline or not," McCown said.

Contact the writer: 402-473-9584, paul.hammel@owh.com

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