Rerouting our energy future: an analysis of the Sandpiper Pipeline proposal

By: Madeline Norgaard, Advisors: Jean Lavigne and Christopher Thoms

Introduction

The Sandpiper Pipeline project proposed by Enbridge Energy Corporation in late 2013 is seeking a 1,161 mile pipeline route to transport 375,000 barrels per day of light crude oil from the North Dakota Bakken formation to a terminal in Superior, Wisconsin. Due to the drastic rise in oil production, pipelines are seemingly necessary to meet the growing demand to transport oil to refineries in the Midwest and Eastern United States. Anticipated benefits include high paying construction and operation jobs, tax revenue, and reliable energy transport. This route is the shortest and least costly, and will traverse 302 miles across northern Minnesota’s high quality watersheds, wildlife habitat, and cultural resources. Since proposed, this route faces contention from a variety of environmental, citizen, and Native American organizations arguing numerous environmental, societal, cultural, and economic risks of the pipeline. I seek to answer, why are pipelines more contentious today than pipelines built in the past?

Methods

First, I compare the political, economic, and environmental context of pipelines constructed in the past across Minnesota and the Midwest including: Enbridge owned Line 5 (built: 1953), Line 3 (built: 1968), Line 67 (built: 2008), and the MinnCan pipeline (built: 2007) owned by the Minnesota Pipe Line Company and operated by Koch Pipeline Company. Constructed with relative ease, in total the pipelines analyzed carry 1,522,000 barrels (42 gallons/barrel) of crude oil per day to meet the transport demands of tar sands oil production in Alberta, Canada. Second, in order to understand the contention of the Sandpiper Pipeline, I analyze recent newspaper articles, public comments, memorandums, testimony, governmental reports and reviews, along with social media sites and organization websites to understand: how and by whom issues are framed; how the decision making and environmental review process works; and how controversy over the Sandpiper Pipeline contributes to the wider fossil fuel dependency/climate change/energy future discussions.

Environmental Risks

- High Quality Water Resources
- Limited Emergency Access to 28 Water Bodies
- Crosses 137 Public Lands
- Construction Damage to Habitat, Wetland Hydrology, and Agricultural Land

Cultural and Societal Risks

- Wild Rice Harvesting Lakes
- Subsistence Land Uses
- Tribal Treaty Rights and Values
- Sacred Land and Waters of Anishinaabe people

Economic Risks

- Northern Minnesota Tourist Industry
- Private Property Values
- Agricultural Land Productivity

Conclusion

Oil pipelines proposed today are far more contested than at any time in recent history due to: 1) the large number of people, communities, and landowners affected by development, 2) the mobilization and connected networks of concerned citizen groups, 3) recognized inadequacies in environmental review, policy, and regulation, and 4) an increased understanding of oil production’s impact on the local environment and climate change. Concerned citizens are the driving force behind the movement that is critical of oil pipeline development in Minnesota. Armed with a greater knowledge of and growing concern for the impact and effects that pipelines can have on the environment, citizens are placing increased pressure on decision makers in both the legislature and regulatory government agencies. Those in positions of responsibility are being made aware of the value Minnesotans place on the preservation and quality of northern Minnesota ecosystems. In the case of whether or not to support the Sandpiper Pipeline, Minnesota will have the opportunity to make a pivotal decision that will have long term effects not only with regard to our dependence on fossil fuels as an energy source, but also the desire for a cleaner energy future and protected environment for all.