



RISK vs REWARD:

Or Why Two Rivers Coalition is Calling for the Shutdown of Line 5 under the Straits of Mackinac

At its July meeting, the TRC Board of Directors passed a resolution calling for the immediate shutdown of Line 5 which carries crude oil products under the Straits of Mackinac. My job is not to convince anyone of the correctness of this decision, but rather, to explain why we felt it was an appropriate action for a local environmental group to take. Remember, the mission of TRC is to..." protect the health of the Black River and Paw Paw River watersheds through conservation, education, and advocacy." As a water quality organization, we believe it is just not enough to work to protect the water only until it runs into Lake Michigan. The fact that all of us here in SW Michigan are part of the Lake Michigan watershed, and in turn, part of the Great Lakes Basin watershed, cannot be ignored. Most importantly, we believe that everyone in that vast but fragile watershed, containing 20% of the world's fresh water, has some responsibility to do what he or she can, to be a responsible steward of that tremendous natural resource. What TRC can do, as a regional environmental group focusing on water quality, is bring attention to potentially catastrophic threats to the waters and ecosystem of the Great Lakes. We are providing links to resources where people can go and get more information and then make up their own minds about how great the risk is and what their personal risk tolerance is to possible environmental catastrophe.

Which brings the discussion back to Enbridge Corporation's Line 5. Under the Straits of Mackinac, lie twin 20-inch pipelines built 64 years ago. Line 5 carries 540,000 barrels per day of crude oil and other petroleum products from Canadian oil fields to Canadian oil refineries and takes an opportunistic shortcut under the Straits through land owned by the State of Michigan. Interestingly, most people have no idea this very old pipeline even exists. Seven years ago I did not know such a pipeline existed deep under the most iconic landscape of our state. I was naïve and assumed that, because such a potentially dangerous thing should not be there, that it wasn't. Until another Enbridge pipeline ruptured in 2010 and spilled massive amounts of oil in Michigan, it never occurred to me that we (and our fresh water) were at risk from a pipeline spill. Everyone knows (just like our State Attorney General Bill Schuette has admitted) that such a pipeline in such an environmentally fragile area would never be allowed today. But hardly anyone knows that pipelines such as this one, built long before laws were passed requiring environmental impact statements, are still out there; environmental time bombs slowly ticking away. There can be no doubt that the State of Michigan and its people have been incredibly lucky over the last 64 years. These twin pipelines, with at least 16 unsupported sections over 75 feet long, have rocked back in forth in the strong currents at the bottom of the Straits, they have become encrusted with invasive Zebra mussels, the outside material has started to delaminate, but at least they haven't ruptured and spilled...YET. Of course, the people along the banks of the Kalamazoo River have not been so lucky. They suffered the consequences of the worst inland oil spill ever in the U.S. when another pipeline owned by Enbridge ruptured, spilled one million gallons of oil into a creek running into the river, and then went undetected by Enbridge for 17 hours.

The State of Michigan has commissioned studies about the threat and alternatives. If you like reading engineering/economic double talk, please read the Alternatives Analysis draft report. I struggled through the "Management Level Executive Summary" and learned a couple valuable things. From a qualitative perspective, it is impossible to calculate a value to the environment threatened by an oil spill because we all value the environment differently. No big surprise there. But it turns out that you can quantify the cost to Michiganders if Line 5 was shut down.

The price of gasoline would rise 2 cents per gallon. The price of liquid propane in the U.P. might go up anywhere from 10 to 35 cents per gallon. Now there might be more costs to people living in Montreal but the most significant cost to the majority of people in Michigan would only be a 2 cent rise in gasoline price. You can debate endlessly the pros and cons of Line 5 and try to calculate the exact odds of another spill occurring like that on the Kalamazoo River (but in an even worse location). But it all comes down to one overarching concept: Risk vs. Reward.

I attended a public hearing in Petoskey about Line 5 and a common refrain by the people who testified was: why are we even considering at all taking the risk of a massive oil spill under the Straits when we receive so little benefit? The position of TRC and every environmental group who has studied the issue is that there are some risks you just do not take. According to a study by the University of Michigan, in a worst-case scenario, over 700 miles of shoreline in Lakes Michigan and Huron would be affected by an oil spill. Can you imagine the effect on the summer tourist trade in both peninsulas? How about the effect on the sport fishing industry? How long would it take to clean up an oil spill during stormy weather which happens frequently there? Think for a moment about the brand "Pure Michigan" that our state legislature has spent tens of millions of our tax dollars promoting for many years. In the event of a massive oil spill at the Straits, the enormous value of the "Pure Michigan" brand would evaporate in the first 30 seconds of video clips on the evening news showing Mackinac Island ferries stuck in a sea of crude oil.

What Michigan is risking is very clear...but what does Michigan stand to gain? We use a very small amount of this oil, some for liquid propane to customers in the U.P. and a small amount refined into gasoline (both of which can be easily replaced). But the vast majority of the oil goes into Canada to a refinery in Sarnia, Ontario. So, there is tremendous risk to Michigan and scant reward. Las Vegas would go broke if that was the risk/reward ratio it offered to gamblers. And let's remember the fundamental rule of gambling: Never, ever bet anything you can't afford to lose. Can we afford to lose the Great Lakes? Why even take the risk if we can remove the risk by paying 2 cents more for gas?

There are actions you can take if this issue is important to you. The State of Michigan is accepting comments from the public until August 4. It is very possible that a large amount of comments on one side or the other of this issue will sway public decision makers. Here on this page, we are providing links to the Michigan Petroleum Pipelines website set up by the State of Michigan where there is information about Line 5, including the Alternatives Analysis draft report and a way to send a comment. We are also providing a link to a website called Oil and Water Don't Mix, which is a campaign organized by a number of Michigan environmental organizations opposed to Line 5. Going to the Oil and Water Don't Mix page will allow you to watch a video about Line 5 and submit a comment to the State of Michigan. Regardless of what you personally decide about this issue, I hope you feel that TRC has provided a valuable service by encouraging debate on an important environmental topic and by encouraging you to become involved citizens and give your comment to the State of Michigan.

Thanks, from the entire Board of Directors of Two Rivers Coalition

Two Rivers Coalition Resolution Calling for Shutdown of Line 5 under the Straits of Mackinac

IT IS RESOLVED THAT,

Because of Two Rivers Coalition's paramount interest in protecting the waters of the State of Michigan and the entire Great Lakes Basin to which the Paw Paw River and Black River flow, and because the potential risk to those waters from a spill or leak from the sixty-four year old Line 5 pipelines under the Straits of Mackinac is potentially catastrophic in terms of both environmental and economic damage, and because the risks of such a catastrophe far outweigh any short-term benefits to the people of the State of Michigan from continued transportation of crude oil products through Line 5,

THEREFORE, Two Rivers Coalition calls upon elected state and federal governmental representatives and relevant regulatory entities to immediately shut down Line 5.

Adopted July 12, 2017