

Sabal Trail what? Florida lawmakers turn a blind eye to construction of a natural gas pipeline

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The green dotted line represents the path of the pipeline.

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Back in 2016, the Florida Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee paid for a mailer touting then-Representative Dana Young's commitment to clean water, citing her support of House Bill 191, "a statewide fracking ban to protect our water." The mailer was disingenuous; that bill was actually a temporary moratorium on the practice of hydraulic fracturing that could have ultimately resulted in it becoming legal. (It was defeated in committee.)

Representative Young, a Tampa Republican, has since become State Senator Young and went on to sponsor Senate Bill 442, an all-out ban on hydraulic fracturing throughout Florida with no trickery.

“We have seen the detrimental impacts fracking has had in many states around the country, most notably Oklahoma and Pennsylvania,” she said in a written statement announcing the bill. “As Floridians, we must join together and say ‘no’ to this harmful activity, before irreversible environmental damage is done. As a 6th generation Floridian and avid outdoorsman, I believe we must act quickly and decisively to protect our fragile environment from incompatible well stimulation practices in our state.”

Given Young’s strong environmental stance, it is curious that she has not released a statement regarding the Sabal Trail Transmission Pipeline, a joint venture between Florida Power & Light, Spectra Energy, NextEra Energy, and Duke Energy.

The 515-mile Sabal Trail pipeline will carry natural gas obtained by hydraulic fracking from Alabama down to central Florida where it will connect with the Florida Southeast Connection. Pipelines from shale gas fields in Oklahoma and Pennsylvania will feed directly into the Sabal Trail Transmission Pipeline; although fracking may soon be banned in Florida, the construction of this pipeline directly supports and promotes the fracking industry.

Young isn't the only politician to voice opposition to fracking while staying silent on projects that keep the practice alive — or are potentially damaging to the water supply and the state's environment in general.

Senator Bill Nelson publicly opposed the Keystone Pipeline in 2014 but he has not come out in opposition to the Sabal Trail pipeline, nor has he responded to the 90,000 constituents who in 2016 signed Progress for All petitions opposing the pipeline. Both Nelson and Senator Marco Rubio (the latter being not exactly a stalwart environmentalist) have received significant campaign donations from NextEra Energy. Governor Rick Scott held a financial stake in Spectra Energy through his blind trust.



Activist Pete Ackerman talks to a group of protesters gathered to outside of Dunnellon to protest the Sabal Trail Pipeline.

YOUTUBE

Though political outrage over the project is almost nowhere to be found, there are quite a few reasons to be concerned about it.

In October of 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a letter detailing the negative impacts that the proposed Sabal Trail pipeline would have on the Floridan Aquifer, water quality, and fragile ecology. For reasons unknown, they reversed their position two months later.

WWALS (Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little and Suwanee rivers) Watershed Coalition brought a suit against Sabal Trail and the Department of Environmental Protection and were defeated. Meanwhile, the Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network and Flint Riverkeeper are in an ongoing lawsuit against the US Army Corps of Engineers for its issuance of three Clean Water Act permits.

Young mentions Florida's fragile environment in her statement, and she is right. Florida's karst limestone geology houses its most precious natural resource — freshwater — but it also fractures and crumbles easily. It's the very quality that makes the limestone porous enough to hold billions of gallons of water — and the reason Florida is notorious for sinkholes. Regardless of this fact, the Sabal Trail pipeline barrels through the most exposed and vulnerable area of the Floridan aquifer, the second most productive aquifer in the world, which provides drinking water to millions of citizens in Florida and Georgia. It also crosses several rivers, including the Santa Fe and the Suwannee, and threatens Florida's fragile underground cave and spring system. Much of the pipeline is going through protected wetlands, including the Green Swamp area and other sensitive habitats home to endangered species such as the gopher tortoise, sandhill crane, Sherman's fox squirrel, sand skink and southeastern American kestrel.

Construction of the pipeline has already caused half a dozen sinkholes along its path, including a 20-foot deep sinkhole in Osceola County that forced a Disney-owned condominium to evacuate. Given Florida's Swiss cheese geology, citizens can expect more of the same as the disturbed ground settles around the pipeline.

According to Carl Weimer, executive director of the Washington-based Pipeline Safety Trust, pipelines installed in the U.S. have the highest rate of failure of any built since the 1920s, often failing during the first year or two due to human error and substandard installation methods. To that end, Sabal Trail Transmission has already racked up hundreds of safety violations as crews hurry to finish the construction process to meet their June deadline.

In a recent phone call, Young's aide, Beau Giles, said that he had not heard of the Sabal Trail Transmission Pipeline and asked for further information. Upon receiving an email providing the information requested, Giles responded that the issue had been noted and filed, and that Senator Young would be briefed on the matter.



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