Pipeline hearing attracts crowd concerned about Atchafalaya

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A crowd of more than 400 — thick with environmentalists, crawfishermen and oil-and-gas workers — packed into a Thursday permit hearing in Baton Rouge on a proposed 163-mile oil pipeline that would cut through the Atchafalaya Basin and span much of south Louisiana.

The proposed Bayou Bridge Pipeline would cross 11 parishes, creating a link between Gulf coast refineries and a major oil-and-gas hub in Texas.

Supporters say the pipeline is a cheaper and safer alternative to other options for crude oil transport: trucks, trains and barges.

In a state already crisscrossed with pipelines, a new one rarely attracts much attention, but local environmental groups have been galvanized by recent protests in North Dakota over completing the Dakota Access pipeline, a project that involves some of the same companies behind Bayou Bridge.

Roughly 100 opponents gathered Thursday for a pre-hearing rally in downtown Baton Rouge, chanting “water is life” and “no bayou bridge.”

They called for the state to chart a path away from dependence on fossil fuels and worried about the environmental impact of an oil leak in the Atchafalaya Basin.
“It’s one of the most beautiful places on earth, ... and they would throw that all away for a few pennies,” said Cherri Foytlin, with the environmental group Bold Louisiana.

In the background, protestors held up a large banner reading, “More Oil Means Less Louisiana.”

Scott Eustis, a wetlands specialist with the Gulf Restoration Network environmental group, told the crowd the proposed pipeline is the “biggest, baddest thing I’ve seen in my career.”

Inside the hearing, which ran for more than three hours, comments were a mix of support, opposition and wariness.

Retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, who leads the Green Army coalition of environmental groups in Louisiana, said the Atchafalaya Basin is already riddled with abandoned and exposed pipelines.

“We do not have the regulations and we do not have the staff to supervise these pipelines,” Honoré said, adding that a compliant state Legislature has done little to force pipeline companies to address past problems.

He was cheered by a rowdy crowd of Bayou Bridge opponents, who also booed former U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu when she spoke in favor on the pipeline project as a consultant for Energy Transfer Partners, one of the companies pursuing it.

Landrieu, who maintained she would support the project even if she wasn’t working for the company, said she has no issue with a shift away from fossil fuels but believes pipelines are the best option for transporting crude oil through the state in the meantime.

“That might happen one day, but that is not today, so the question before us is how to move this product as carefully as possible,” Landrieu said.

Someone yelled “traitor” as she spoke. Another cried out, “you used to work for us.”

Environmentalists opposed to the project have found common ground with Basin crawfishermen, who have long complained about existing pipelines in the Basin.

Companies that built prior pipelines in the swamp have left behind make-shift levees with the dirt dug out to make trenches for the pipes, blocking the natural flow of water.

“There is no reason we should have crippled our environment the way it has been crippled over the past decade. It is crippling our water flow,” said Jody Meche, a commercial crawfisherman and a councilman for the town of Henderson on the western edge of the Basin.

He and St. Martin Parish President Guy Cormier both said they have no issues with the oil-and-gas industry, but they called on the regulators to ensure that any new pipelines don’t result in more makeshift levees fouling water flow in the swamp.

“I’m here to make sure this project, if done, is done in the right way,” Cormier said.

Joey Mahmoud, with Energy Transfer Partners, said in comments before the hearing that current regulations require that the natural contour of the swamp be restored after the pipeline is installed.

He also defended the safety of the project.

“With the new technology that’s available, it will prove to be one of the safest pipelines built in Louisiana, just because of the fact it is being built today instead of the past,” he said.
The hearing was held jointly by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which decides whether to issue the permit, and the state Department of Environmental Quality, which must give its OK on water quality impacts as part of the Corps' permit approval process.

No timeline has been set for a decision on the permit.

The Bucket Brigade, the Louisiana chapter of the Sierra Club, the Gulf Restoration Network, the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper and five other environmental and conservation groups have joined in a formal request that the Corps deny the federal permit needed for the pipeline.

State officials have expressed few concerns.

State Reps. Nancy Landry, from Lafayette, and Stephen Dwight, from Lake Charles, both wrote letters in support of the project.

Gov. John Bel Edwards, in comments to The Advocate editorial board this week, said the state needs to be mindful of environmental dangers but said he know of few problems with existing pipelines in the state.

“The idea of another pipeline traversing the Atchafalaya Basin does not keep me up at night,” Edwards said.
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