

Both sides framed Keystone XL Pipeline debate in Nebraska

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As supporters and opponents of the proposed Keystone XL (KXL) Pipeline testified at public hearings in Nebraska between 2010-2013, several interest groups attempted to frame the debate in different ways.

A University of Kansas (KU) researcher who examined 528 testimonies from public hearings in Nebraska said the debate boiled down to a confrontation between stakeholders in two types of natural resources: water from the Oglala Aquifer and bitumen extracted from Alberta, Canada.

"It's not a battle between these two resources, but the cultural values people ascribe to these natural resources," said James Ordner, a KU doctoral candidate in sociology and the study's author. "Community opposition to energy projects may occur more often as the oil and gas industry spreads into areas that it traditionally hasn't operated in."

Ordner will present his findings as part of the paper, "The Keystone XL Pipeline and At-Risk Communities in Nebraska," on Saturday, Aug. 22, at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

President Barack Obama is deciding whether to allow TransCanada Corporation to complete the pipeline across Nebraska so that it can move diluted bitumen from the Alberta Province to refineries located on the Texas Gulf Coast. The plan has drawn the most criticism in Nebraska, particularly from landowners living in Nebraska's

environmentally sensitive Sandhills region and farmers and ranchers who depend on the underground aquifer.

During the public comment hearings in Nebraska handled by the U.S. State Department and the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, proponents of the pipeline often stressed economic benefits, job creation and national security issues to rally public support for the energy project, he said.

"At the beginning of the KXL debate, job numbers were a really a big selling point because of the nation's financial situation after 2008," Ordner said. "Job creation is an almost sacred issue for many KXL supporters, especially for more conservative or business-minded folks."

Initially, job numbers were somewhat exaggerated by many pipeline supporters, and numbers like "100,000 new jobs" were sometimes used to try and promote the project, he said. The final State Department Environmental Impact Statement suggests up to 40,000 direct and indirect jobs would be created by the project.

"Outside of economic benefits, pipeline supporter testimonies talked about the high skill level of pipeline construction workers and the state-of-the-art technology TransCanada would use to construct the pipeline," Ordner said.

Proponents also stressed national security concerns and energy independence, such as reducing dependence on OPEC nations and other sources of foreign oil.

Some KXL supporter testimonies attempted to characterize opposition members in Nebraska as environmental extremists. According to Ordner, this assertion is misplaced because the pipeline opposition in Nebraska is composed of rural farmers, ranchers and concerned citizens,

not environmental activists.

The opposition movement, under the leadership of Jane Kleeb and Bold Nebraska, has focused on landowner concerns about potential contamination of the aquifer. Landowners fear that if the pipeline leaked, toxic chemicals could contaminate the aquifer and make well water undrinkable for humans and livestock.

"The aquifer for these ranchers and farmers is like one big backyard to them, so they share this resource," Ordner said. "That's what is unifying people."

Many landowners also claimed that because the diluted bitumen from KXL is headed for Gulf Coast refineries, which are allowed to export refined fuels, the products made from KXL petroleum would ultimately be destined for foreign markets, not domestic use. The data also indicates landowners are concerned about private property rights and eminent domain issues and preserving the aquifer for future generations.

Bold Nebraska, the organization leading the KXL fight in Nebraska, has been savvy about mobilizing rural landowners. The organization staged several events like constructing a renewable energy barn on the pipeline route and hosting a "Harvest of Hope Concert" featuring Neil Young and Willie Nelson.

"Bold Nebraska members and citizen activists built this renewable energy barn right in the pathway of the [pipeline](#)," Ordner said. "That's one form of creative resistance that appeals to the rural landowners."

The KXL debate has also created an unlikely alliance between ranchers, Native Americans, progressives and conservative rural landowners. The diverse mix of people making up the opposition movement makes it difficult for proponents of the project to criticize the opposition in

Nebraska, particularly rural [landowners](#).

Ordner said it was important to study how various interests are framing the debate in Nebraska because similar debates are likely to crop up in the future as communities encounter more oil and gas exploration projects like hydraulic fracturing, known as "fracking," and other [energy projects](#).

"I think what's happening in rural Nebraskan communities may occur more often as communities mobilize to voice concerns over shared resources like water, which can work to unify people in common cause," he said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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