

New Jersey OKs gas pipeline through protected Pinelands

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This Jan. 6, 2014, file photo shows a section of the Pinelands region in Lakehurst N.J. New Jersey regulators are set to vote Friday, Feb. 24, 2017, on whether a natural gas pipeline should run through the state's federally protected Pinelands preserve. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry, File)

New Jersey environmental regulators on Friday approved a hotly contested plan to run a natural gas pipeline through a federally protected

forest preserve amid raucous protests that included drums, tambourines and choruses of "This Land Is Your Land."

The 15-member New Jersey Pinelands Commission voted to approve a plan by South Jersey Gas to run the pipeline through the federally protected Pinelands preserve, where development is drastically restricted. The protesters' loud ruckus drowned out the members, even as they voted nine in favor and five against, with one abstention.

It was the most emotionally charged jobs-vs-environment clash in recent New Jersey history, and was closely watched by environmental and energy groups around the nation, particularly with a new presidential administration seen as more supportive of the energy industry.

"As a priest, I will pray for you when you stand before the throne of God and you are asked to give an accounting of your stewardship of this special ecological area," said Rev. David Stump, a Catholic priest from Jersey City. "May God have mercy on your souls."

"Your legacy is disgraceful!" added Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

The company said the vote "recognizes the energy reliability challenges facing southern New Jersey and the balanced solution this project offers. The careful construction of this pipeline will address the energy demands of 142,000 customers in Cape May and Atlantic counties, protect and create jobs, and provide a meaningful opportunity to significantly reduce air emissions."

The B.L. England power plant, where the pipeline would end, currently burns coal and oil to generate electricity.

"The use of natural gas and state-of-the-art emissions control technology,

together, can turn the facility into a cleaner and more efficient generator of electricity for the people of south Jersey," RC Cape May Holdings, the plant's owners, said in a statement after the vote.



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Protesters repeatedly disrupted the meeting, chanting "No! No! No!" for nearly 10 minutes when the commission was about to vote. They burst into song in protest whenever a commissioner voted in favor of the plan.

After the plan was approved, they chanted, "Shame on you!" and "See you in court!" Pipeline supporters including construction workers,

though greatly outnumbered, chanted "USA! USA!"

Tittel said his and other environmental groups plan to challenge the approval in court on numerous procedural and factual grounds, hoping to delay it long enough for New Jersey's next governor to appoint Pinelands commissioners that will reverse the decision. Republican Gov. Chris Christie's successor will be elected in November.

The 22-mile pipeline plan was narrowly defeated in 2014. But since then, Christie has replaced several Pinelands commissioners with supporters of the pipeline.

Carleton Montgomery, executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, called the vote "a symptom of what's going on nationally" regarding pipeline projects.

South Jersey Gas plans to run the pipeline mostly under or alongside existing roads. The company says it already operates over 1,400 miles of gas mains and 133 miles of elevated pressure lines within the Pinelands without harming the environment.

After the proposal was defeated in 2014, the executive director of the Pinelands Commission unilaterally decided that it met the agency's criteria and was therefore approved. Environmentalists sued, and a court ordered the commission to take a new vote.

Environmental groups fear the pipeline will harm the fragile Pinelands and set a bad precedent for future development. They say it will cause a loss of habitat and increase runoff and erosion in an area that is home to an aquifer that is estimated to hold 17 trillion gallons of some of the nation's purest water.

South Jersey Gas maintains that in addition to providing a cleaner fuel

source to the power plant, the new pipeline would provide a second transmission vehicle for natural gas to customers in the two southern New Jersey counties. Currently, only one pipeline takes gas to nearly 29,000 homes and businesses, which could be left out in the cold without a second way of getting gas to their homes if the existing pipeline fails.

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