

Another Voice: Northern Access Pipeline could endanger water supply for thousands

By Lia Oprea and Ronald Fraser

National Fuel's proposed 97-mile Northern Access gas pipeline will supply Canadian citizens while it puts the Cattaraugus Creek Basin Aquifer – the sole source of drinking water for about 20,000 residents in Cattaraugus, Erie and Wyoming counties – at risk.

For almost 13 miles, from Machias in Cattaraugus County to Allen Road in the Town of Sardinia in Erie County, the pipeline will cut through the center of the aquifer. If the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) recklessly disregards red flags raised in a 1987 federal Environmental Protection Agency report, "Sole Source Aquifer Determination Cattaraugus Creek Basin Aquifer," and gives National Fuel the green light, FERC must be held accountable if the aquifer is damaged.

Here is why FERC should protect Americans and tell National Fuel "no."

The EPA report designated the Cattaraugus Creek Basin Aquifer, in accord with the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, to be the sole source of drinking water for eight municipal and 15 community water systems, and countless private wells, serving Delevan, Freedom, Machias, Yorkshire, Chaffee, Springville, Sardinia and Arcade.

In the Sardinia area, because the aquifer's water is recharged through sand and gravel deposits that are, according to the report, "exposed at land surface, it is potentially susceptible to contamination from surface sources ..."

The report concludes with this stark warning: "The residents of communities within the area defined by the Cattaraugus Creek Basin Aquifer are entirely dependent upon groundwater for their drinking water supply. If substantial contamination were to occur, it would create a significant hazard to public health ..."

FERC's July environment assessment of National Fuel's proposal acknowledges that 12.8 miles of the proposed pipeline in Cattaraugus and Erie counties would cross the Cattaraugus Creek Basin Aquifer. But FERC goes on to say, "Pipeline construction activities are not likely to result in significant impacts on groundwater resources because the majority of construction would involve shallow, temporary and localized excavation ... The direct and indirect impacts would be temporary and would not significantly affect groundwater resources."

That's it. No order to reroute the pipeline. No mandated measures to protect the aquifer. A Pollyanna FERC simply says, don't worry.

But what if the impacts are huge and permanent? And what if, after the pipeline is in operation, a huge pipeline failure fills the aquifer with tons of methane gas?

Once an aquifer is designated a sole source of drinking water, the Safe Drinking Water Act prohibits federal agencies from funding projects that may contaminate the aquifer. It seems hypocritical that a federal agency, FERC, is in the business of authorizing pipeline companies, using private funds, to do just that, to put sole source aquifers at risk.

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