Ike Brannon: The value of Wisconsin's pipelines

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There is an oil pipeline–Enbridge Line 5–that runs from Superior, across Wisconsin, and through Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsula. In Wisconsin, the pipeline passes through the reservation of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians.

A decade ago, the Tribe declined to renew the lease on the portion that passes through its land and asked that this portion be removed from their land. To honor that request, Enbridge procured land that will allow it to reroute the pipeline so that it no longer passes through the reservation.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources must now approve the project, and several groups have registered their objections to this plan. One main reason given for their opposition to the new section of pipeline is that the production and transportation of oil contributes to the creation of greenhouse gas emissions and that shutting it down altogether will serve to lessen emissions.

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A second reason why groups have opposed the pipeline project is that they contend the continued existence of the pipeline constitutes an immediate environmental threat to Northern Wisconsin because of the possibility of oil spills.

However, neither objection is rooted in reality: Ending the pipeline would do environmental and economic harm to the state, and it would fail to reduce greenhouse gasses.

I was one of the authors of an economic analysis of the new pipeline's impact on Wisconsin. The most important data point relevant to this discussion is that pipelines are easily the safest and most environmentally friendly methods to transport oil across land. If the pipeline were to close, the oil currently being transported by the Line 5 pipeline would be transported by truck or train instead, both of which are more polluting, less safe, and costlier. Enbridge estimates that if it were to replace the pipeline with trucks, it would need nearly 100 to leave its hub each hour and go across the state of Wisconsin. A study recently published by the [Fraser Institute](#) found that oil traveling by rail is nearly five times more likely to experience an occurrence or accident per mile carried, and trucks [have even more accidents](#) than railroads.

Also, the environmentalists who want to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gasses would achieve a purely Pyrrhic victory were they to close Line 5. Despite fervent wishes–and trillions of dollars of investment into alternative energy sources–the United States remains dependent upon fossil fuels for the majority of its energy needs, and this will remain true for the foreseeable future. Closing down pipelines like Line 5 will not do a thing to hasten the advent of emissions-free energy dominating the market: all it will do is result in the creation of even more pollution caused by the transport of oil and gas.

Besides being safer than rail or truck in transporting oil, pipelines are also much less polluting. More trucks on the road would not only increase smog and carbon emissions that they produce, but the increased congestion they engender would result in other cars and trucks on the road increasing emissions as well.

If anyone's long-term plan for reduced carbon emissions entails more carbon emissions in the short run, I've not yet encountered it.

If we want to reduce greenhouse gas and smog emissions in the U.S., closing down pipelines is not a tractable way to accomplish it. The Line 5 pipeline transports oil in the safest and least polluting way possible, and its demise would expose the people in Northern Wisconsin to more pollution, higher energy costs, and greater inconvenience.

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