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Great Lakes pipelines: Safe, or short-sighted?

Plan to sink gas pipes stirs debate over impact

By Jeremy Pearce / The Detroit News

Energy companies envision a safe underwater route for an environmentally sound cargo: natural gas piped beneath the Great Lakes to keep homes warm and factories running.

Environmentalists see plans to sink pipelines in Lakes Michigan and Erie as a short-sighted disruption to wildlife and commercial shipping that threatens to revive pollution buried in bottom sediments.

Federal regulators are considering plans for a 93-mile pipeline spanning Lake Erie between New York and Canada. A second line, connecting Milwaukee and Indiana beneath 90 miles of Lake Michigan, has been proposed.

Both are novel efforts by energy companies to pump natural gas to untapped markets, although critics argue that transmission will set a disastrous precedent for future underwater traffic.

"We're talking about the water supply for 13 million people," said Cameron Davis of the Lake Michigan Federation, a conservation group based in Chicago.

"If we open up our lake bottoms now, we're opening them to oil, chemical products and other things much more dangerous than natural gas."

If approved, the landmark Millennium Pipeline Project linking Canadian gas to U.S. markets would begin in 2002.

Backers of the second project, destined for Lake Michigan, are awaiting the Erie decision and have yet to file with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

"We did consider overland routes for the pipeline," said Karl Brack of Columbia Gas Transmission Corp., a West Virginia company overseeing the Erie pipeline plans.

"We concluded that crossing the lake is really the best way," Brack said.

Energy commission members hold the power to deny the projects and are reviewing environmental studies of underwater construction. A decision on the Lake Erie pipeline is expected this summer.

Gov. John Engler supports underwater exploration in the Great Lakes for

Great Lakes pipelines

Pro: Pipelines promote use of natural gas, which burns cleaner than oil or coal. Underwater lines solve questions of land rights-of-way, are more direct and have been proven for decades in the Gulf of Mexico.

Con: Fish, waterfowl and aquatic insects may be harmed. Pipelines set a precedent for further underwater traffic. Trenches blasted in lake bottoms will stir sediments, clouding lake waters and reviving contamination.

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Chicago officials, however, oppose underwater traffic and remain critical of a Whitecap Energy Systems pipeline that would travel within a few miles of city shorelines en route to Wisconsin.

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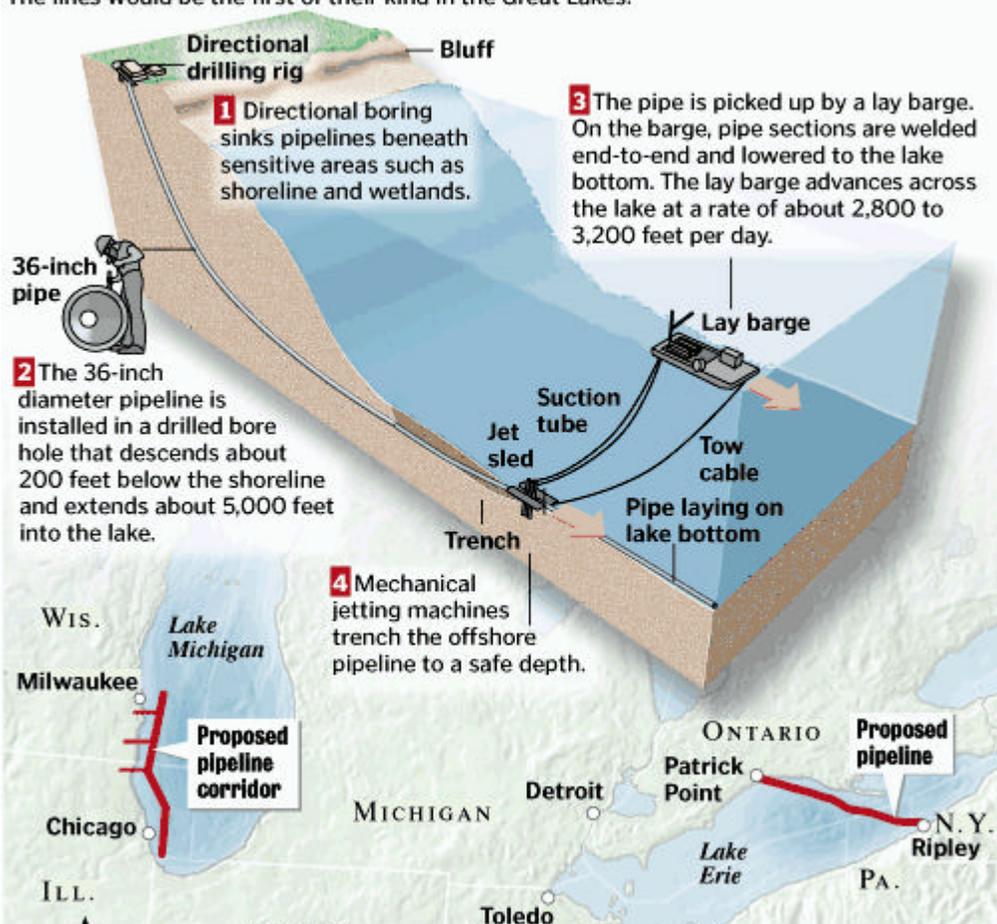
Gov. John Engler supports underwater exploration in the Great Lakes for oil and gas, as well as lake-bed transmission of natural gas, "a procedure that can go forward without environmental damage," according to an aide.

Chicago officials, however, oppose underwater traffic and remain critical of a Whitecap Energy Systems pipeline that would travel within a few miles of city shorelines en route to Wisconsin.

"Our serious concern is about the precedent," said Jessica Rio of Chicago's department of the environment. "We shouldn't accept using Lake Michigan as a path of least resistance."

Gas under the lakes

Plans for two new natural gas pipelines call for major underwater construction. Concrete-encased steel pipes would be deposited in trenches on lake floors. The lines would be the first of their kind in the Great Lakes.





Old technology used

Both projects would drop 40-foot lengths of concrete-encased steel pipe to lake bottoms, depositing the lines in trenches blasted earlier by water jets. The pipelines, 36 inches in diameter, would be buried where they cross shorelines. The underwater trenches would be left to fill gradually with sediment.

"This is technology that has been used around the world for many years," said Joe Martucci of Detroit-based ANR Pipeline Co., which is associated with the Lake Michigan project.

Energy companies argue that a record of underwater success in the Gulf of Mexico and difficulties of obtaining shoreline rights-of-way make Great Lakes lines safe and necessary.

"We prefer water routes because we're not forced to dig up someone else's land," said Jerry Halvorsen, president of the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America, a trade group in Washington.

"Almost all of the Gulf of Mexico now has pipelines -- it's like a bunch of spiderwebs. This industry has had an extensive network of underwater lines for 40 years," he said.

Gulf project to start

In February, the federal energy commission approved the largest Gulf pipeline bid in history.

Next month, Gulfstream Gas Co. will begin a 400-mile link connecting gas wells in Alabama to consumers in Florida. At a cost of \$1.6 billion, the pipeline is scheduled to make its first delivery of gas in June 2002.

"From an engineering standpoint, there are a lot of challenges," said Chris Stockton, a spokesman for Gulfstream, a Texas energy company.

"We're looking at putting pipes 800 feet beneath the Gulf's surface before this is all done and on line."

Making a broader argument, backers of pipelines say use of natural gas brings worthy environmental perks.

Compared to burning coal or oil, gas creates far fewer of the air pollutants known as particulates. In the Great Lakes and in the Gulf, any rupture to a pipeline, they say, would result in a harmless release of gas bubbling up to the water's surface.

Lakes damage feared

But federal environmental investigators have listed concerns about lasting damages to Great Lakes fish and wildlife if pipeline projects are approved.

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report published last year found that bottom sediment stirred by pipeline trenching "has the potential for contaminant release ... possibly having sub-lethal or even lethal effects" on fish and small organisms burrowing in bottom areas.

The report specifically reviewed the proposed Lake Erie crossing, taking into account toxins in sediments, effects of cloudier waters and dangers created when winter ice scour the lake bottoms.

Across all five Great Lakes, an industrial legacy of mercury, pesticides, PCBs, chromium, lead and more than 200 other pollutants has become a material issue.

Water levels are at their lowest in four decades. Recent and intense dredging of marinas, harbors and shipping channels in Michigan and other states is churning up past pollution, likely reaching fish and waterfowl, and the humans who eat them.

Deeper Erie trench urged

The Army Corps report concludes that because of threats from winter ice breaking the pipeline, the Lake Erie trench should be significantly deeper than planned, from 9.2 feet to 11.2 feet.

Sled-mounted devices would direct a water jet to carve the trench along the lake's bottom. At its deepest zone, it would be about 90 feet below the surface.

The bulk of disturbed sediments would then be left to resettle naturally -- a notion that worries environmental groups.

"Right now, we have fish (consumption) advisories all over the lakes. What kind of long-term affects from these pipelines are we really going to have?" asked Jennifer Nalbene, staff ecologist with Great Lakes United, a consortium of 170 environmental groups, based in Buffalo, N.Y.

"This is a closed, freshwater system -- not the open sea or the Gulf."

Good sediment found

Yet Corps scientists reviewing bottom samples from 100 points along the pipeline's proposed path have found "good quality sediment," according to the report.

Scientists looked for mercury as an index of pollution, a decision that critics say neglected other, equally dangerous toxins.

"Look, this is no little project. This hasn't been done before," said Scott Hans, a Corps biologist involved in the Lake Erie study.

"The actual sediment sampling was done by the applicant's consultant, but we're satisfied this zone has been shown to be below precolonization levels (of pollution)."

Even with Army Corps support, the Millennium Pipeline Project faces other hurdles before it can begin moving Canadian gas 424 miles to its end target: consumers just outside of New York City.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission members are evaluating the line's route through New York state as it crosses highways, rivers and protected wetlands, passes businesses and travels near residences.

Several hundred miles to the west, on Lake Michigan, the Whitecap pipeline proposal marks a 90-mile underwater path that roughly parallels shore. That line would remain in a corridor three to 10 miles offshore, from Crete Township, Ind., north to Milwaukee.

Fish species threatened

On land, both projects face issues of rights-of-way, construction noise

and road closures. But perhaps the next greatest stumbling block for the Lake Erie line will come at the Hudson River.

A critical 2.1-mile river crossing would disturb the federally endangered shortnose sturgeon and seven other fish species.

"Environmental impact is a key component of the commission's review," said energy commission spokeswoman Tamara Young-Allen.

The committee, down to three members, awaits the arrival of two new Bush administration nominees.

"It's one component. Obviously, we're trying to make this decision as soon as humanly possible."

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