



The Past and Future of the Dakota Access Pipeline

Jennifer Wilczynski, University of San Diego

As the 2016 election and its fallout were broadcast to millions of American households, so too were images of hundreds of Native Americans and allies setting up camps around a pipeline construction site in North Dakota. Left- and right-leaning media alike have featured the construction project and the protests surrounding it, creating front-page headlines for one of the country's least populous states. In a polarized political climate, arguments range for or against the project. But many Americans still may not know crucial details about the pipeline and protestor opposition to it – and may not grasp what will happen now that Donald Trump is President and the pipeline is nearly operational. To truly understand future energy policy choices as well as the motivations of energy corporations and tribal peoples, we must engage with the details of the Dakota Access conflict, even if it may now be mostly over.

An Energy Project with Billions of Dollars at Stake

The Dakota Access Pipeline Project connects the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota to Illinois with a pipeline stretching approximately 1,172 miles. According to the lobbying group Midwest Alliance for Infrastructure Now, the new conduit is supposed to be "among the safest, most technologically advanced pipelines in the world." The main supporters are Energy Transfer Partners and Sunoco Logistics, two large companies that primarily focus on similar pipeline projects. Constructing a functional pipeline over this many miles is a very costly endeavor, and the major banks and financial corporations underwriting the financing include Barclays, Wells Fargo, and Citibank. In total, Energy Transfer Partners has received \$3.75 billion and Sunoco Logistics \$2.5 billion in financial support from these and other major banks. In addition to those sums, Energy Transfer Equity, a Fortune 500 company and sister partnership to Energy Transfer Partners, has a credit line with another \$1.5 billion in commitments from international banks. According to the nonprofit Food & Water Watch, in total, "there is \$10.25 billion in loans and credit facilities from 38 banks directly supporting the companies building the pipeline." All of them presumably hope to be paid back from the profits generated by the pipeline.

This pipeline will have a drastic impact on the economy. More domestic oil will be produced, making the United States less reliant on international markets; and many jobs could potentially be created. The pipeline is projected to carry half of the Bakken daily oil production – approximately 470,000 barrels per day with a capacity as high as 570,000 barrels per day or more. Sunoco Logistics envisions an expansion of the Bakken oil fields production not only to supply multiple markets throughout the United States, including in the Midwest and on the East Coast, but along the Gulf Coast as well through a Sunoco crude oil terminal facility in Texas. American oil exports will rise as imports fall, ultimately creating an economic benefit. In addition, the pipeline will generate an estimated \$156 million in sales and income tax payments to state and local governments and add some 8,000 to 12,000 construction jobs throughout the United States.

Along with Benefits for Some Come Costs for Others

Although the Dakota Access project promises economic benefits to certain states, workers, and corporate backers, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe fears harm to their already constricted lands and partially contaminated drinking water from pipeline accidents during and after construction. Protests erupted only one day after the tribe filed court papers insisting that the pipeline crossed several sites of "significant cultural and historical value." As protesters clashed with security officers armed with pepper spray and dogs, riot-like demonstrations and violence resulted. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe along with other Native American tribes and activists took many steps to stop the project. Unsurprisingly, their protests were countered by powerful corporations with economic interests in finishing construction and making the pipeline fully operational as soon as possible.

As it stands now, the pipeline has destroyed Native American burial sites, prayer sites, and culturally significant artifacts. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's organizing efforts grew into a mass movement involving various Native American tribes – some local and others not – who camped near the construction sites and staged protests that forced delays in shoring up the pipe's final sections. Many of these protests resulted in violence against the Native Americans and their allies. As one witness recounted to a journalist, when "demonstrators came to stop the tractors, they ... encountered private security armed with pepper spray, attack dogs, and zip ties." During her campaign, Green Party presidential nominee Jill Stein participated in protests and online activism, writing on her campaign website that the pipeline "would violate U.S. treaties by endangering the drinking water and sacred sites of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe."

All of this came to a halt after Donald Trump won the November 2016 election and moved into the White House in January 2017. Since then, the Trump administration and the state government of North Dakota have ordered the completion of the project and the removal of the protestors. Any future environmental impact on tribal lands will only reveal itself in due course.

An Uncertain Future with Uneven Consequences

Undeniably, the Dakota Access Pipeline and the majority of all oil pipelines pose a significant threat to the environment – including immediate threats beyond long-term contributions to global warming. Very recently, a Colonial Pipeline leaked in Shelby County, Alabama, spilling 250,000 gallons of fuel and contaminating a small town's drinking water. Additional pipeline spills have occurred across the country on nearly every single similar project. The Dakota Access Pipeline crosses beneath the Missouri River, where even the smallest spill has the potential to contaminate and pollute surrounding waterways. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe is entirely dependent on the Missouri River for their water needs, and the general population of the state of Missouri takes 43% of its drinking water from the same source. If the Dakota Access Pipeline ruptures, it will leak thousands of gallons of crude oil – a catastrophe that would visit an outsize impact on Native Americans as well as the non-Native poor.

In sum, although this massive new pipeline is guaranteed to provide economic benefits to some, the negative repercussions and potential downsides of the pipeline are unevenly allocated. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has already been negatively affected, and Americans who have watched this saga unfold from afar must now await news of future profits and losses certain to accrue as the oil begins to flow south. Who benefits and who loses remains to be seen.