

Opinion: Environmental Protection Agency flip-flops on Sabal Trail pipeline

Submitted by Gulf Restoration Network | Posted: Thursday, December 17, 2015 12:43 pm

Less than two months after the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stated concerns with the Sabal Trail natural gas pipeline project, the government agency changed its stance and dropped all objections. The 515 mile, \$3.2 billion project will impact the Santa Fe and Suwannee rivers, thousands of springs, the Floridan Aquifer, and several hundred of acres of wetlands.



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In October, the EPA wrote a scathing letter to the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) - the body which will decide whether to issue a Clean Water act permit for the project.

“We have environmental objections to a significant portion of the proposed pipeline route,” stated Christopher Militscher, the chief of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) program office in its letter to Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).

However, two months later, EPA has dropped its objections, just before the Corps is slated to make a final decision.

“This sudden, 180 degree reversal raises the question of whether the pipeline's powerful investors pulled political strings to get EPA to back away from the objections it raised a few months ago in a letter to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission,” said Frank Jackalone, senior organizing manager for Sierra Club Florida.

“Sinkhole activity in Florida is pervasive and nearly random,” the EPA stated on Oct. 26.

Changing its tune on Dec. 11, the EPA submitted a comment to the Corps stating that it would be a “highly unlikely event” for a sinkhole to occur along the pipeline route. Building a pipeline on karst geology of Northern Florida poses a threat to the Floridan Aquifer, the main drinking water source for the entire state.

Originally, the EPA supported avoiding the threat to the Floridan Aquifer stating, “The proposed pipeline is expected by the EPA to have significant impacts to karst areas.” adding “The creation of craters in a sensitive vulnerable aquifer such as the Floridan Aquifer are a problem to be avoided... they need to be avoided as they cannot be mitigated.” Now the EPA is stating that “the Floridan Aquifer underlies all of Florida and part of Georgia, avoiding routing the pipeline over the Aquifer would be impossible.”

Johanna de Graffenreid, the Coastal Campaign organizer for Gulf Restoration Network spoke to the issue.

“Floridians deserve to know that their drinking water is being protected. If the aquifer cannot be avoided this pipeline should not be built. Period. The EPA must live up to its obligations to protect Florida communities and the environment by vetoing this project,” she said.

Gulf Restoration Network (GRN) is a 21-year-old non-profit dedicated to uniting and empowering people to protect and restore the health of the Gulf of Mexico.