

What is it?

The Keystone XL pipeline is a 1,700-mile, \$7 billion project that would bring 700,000 barrels of carbon-heavy tar-sands oil per day from Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the Gulf Coast. It would be an extension of a pipeline that became operational in June 2010 and already carries crude oil from Alberta to Illinois and Oklahoma.

Whose is it?

TransCanada is the company hoping to build the pipeline. Under federal law, the State Department makes the decision on the permit for TransCanada to begin the project, because the pipeline would cross international borders. However, if another federal agency raises concerns about the permit, the decision is automatically kicked up to the White House. The Obama administration announced in November that it would delay a decision on the pipeline permit until an alternative route in Nebraska is considered.

Why do environmental groups and some Democrats oppose it?

Environmentalists are concerned that the extraction and production of tar-sands oil is much more damaging to the environment and emits more greenhouse gases than the processes for obtaining and processing conventional oil. If the pipeline is built, it would greatly expand the market for the oil, hastening its extraction and potentially adding to global climate change, they say. Opponents of the project are also concerned with the impartiality of State's pipeline-review process. Cardno Entrix, a consulting firm that counts TransCanada among its major clients, completed the environmental impact review for the project. In addition, e-mails uncovered through the Freedom of Information Act showed what environmentalists said was a too-cozy relationship between a TransCanada lobbyist and a State Department employee.

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