

The process that Nebraska established to review TransCanada's proposed new oil pipeline route is in its early days yet. Thus far, it appears to be working as planned.

The state's environmental agency said the new route for the Keystone XL pipeline meets the Legislature's intent for the line to bypass the state's environmentally sensitive Sand Hills region. That's reassuring.

The Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and its contractor, HDR of Omaha, did suggest that TransCanada Inc. consider what look to be some relatively small route adjustments to protect porous, sandy soil and shallow groundwater along its new path. That groundwater provides the only source of water for people and animals in the area.

If TransCanada doesn't believe those route adjustments are possible, the state asked the company to outline why and describe steps to protect groundwater in areas of concern.

The state's report also detailed concerns raised by citizens during public meetings in May, including questions about emergency response to spills, chemical makeup of the oil and how quickly leaks would be detected.

TransCanada Inc. initially had proposed constructing the \$7 billion Keystone XL pipeline from Canada to the Gulf Coast through the Nebraska Sand Hills and over the Ogallala Aquifer, environmentally fragile geography indeed.

The worries of ranchers, environmentalists, elected officials and many other Nebraskans about potential leaks were among reasons cited by the Obama administration when it denied the required federal permit in January.

The delay hasn't been all bad.

The company took the opportunity offered by the extra time to add more capacity to the proposed pipeline, which would carry bitumen oil sands crude to southern refineries from Alberta. TransCanada said it would spend an extra \$600 million on the project to increase its capacity from 700,000 barrels to 830,000 barrels a day. With its other, already operational pipeline capacity, that would mean the company could send about 1.4 million barrels of bitumen crude south from the Alberta tar sands.

TransCanada has vowed to construct "the safest, most advanced pipeline built in America." It is expected to decide whether to take the DEQ's suggestions and should submit a final proposal for a 500-foot-wide corridor to the agency again in August. Then Gov. Dave Heineman will make a final decision on whether the route is acceptable from the state's viewpoint.

A federal decision on the high-pressure pipeline issue is generally expected next year; the U.S.

State Department has authority over the pipeline permit because it crosses the U.S. border.

Other objections to the pipeline have been raised by environmentalists, who allege that mining tar-sands oil is a major source of carbon dioxide pollution. They have lobbied the federal government to deny the Keystone permit on that alone.

It's hard to justify killing the project when the United States needs the oil from a stable, friendly neighbor. And the nation — and Nebraska — can use the construction and operating jobs the pipeline would bring.

It's still fairly early in the new approval process. But so far, so good