

U.S. delays Keystone XL pipeline project

Controversial pipeline plan gets delayed again

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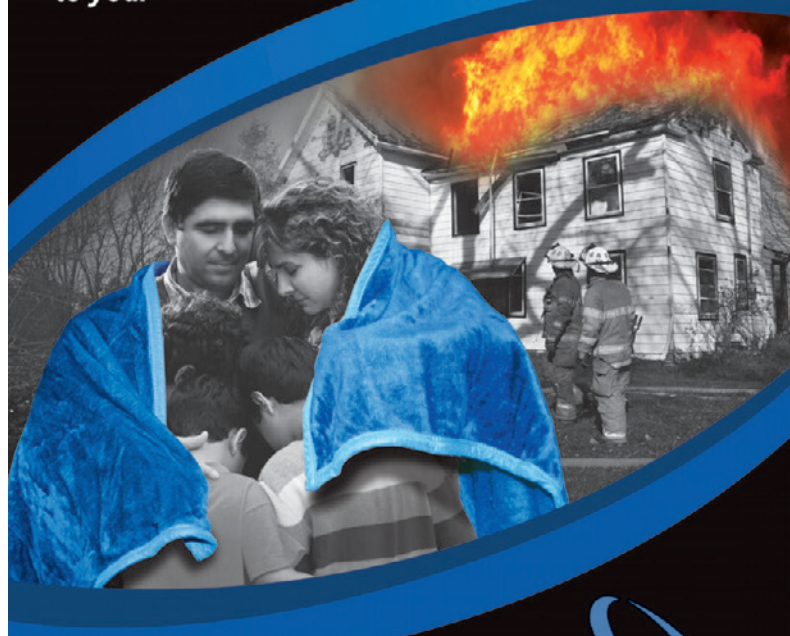
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Sheldon ALBERTS and Mark KENNEDY
Postmedia News

WASHINGTON — The controversial Keystone XL pipeline from the Alberta oilsands into the Southern U.S. appears to have been delayed.

The U.S. government skirted questions Thursday about the fate of the TransCanada Corp. pipeline, but the Canadian government appeared to confirm the development.

"We are disappointed with today's decision to delay a decision on the Keystone XL pipeline," Andrew MacDougall, a spokesman for Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Thursday.

"As we have consistently said, the pipeline will create thousands of jobs and billions in economic growth on both sides of the border. While disappointed with the delay, we remain hopeful the project will be decided on its merits and eventually approved."

U.S. media reports said the Obama administration was delaying the project so it can consider an alternative route that would move the pipeline away from the Ogallala Aquifer and the ecologically fragile Sand Hills in Nebraska.

That would potentially delay the project past the 2012 U.S. presidential election.

"I don't have anything to add from what I said yesterday," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters.

State Department officials had said Wednesday that all options regarding Keystone XL were on the table — including the potential for rerouting the pipeline and outright denial of a permit allowing Calgary-based TransCanada to build the pipeline.

The pipeline would run 2,700 kilometres from Hardisty, Alta., to refineries on the Gulf Coast of Texas, carrying as much as 830,000 barrels worth of crude oil per day.

A spokeswoman for Harper, meanwhile, said Thursday that if Keystone were to be delayed or lost, the government would continue to focus on exporting crude to Asian markets.

"Canada will be looking for a buyer," spokeswoman Sara McIntyre said. "We're a resource-based, energy-based country and we'll be looking at all opportunities."

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The apparent move by the Obama administration will likely cast a chill over U.S. relations with the Harper government.

Harper has said approval of Keystone XL should be a complete no brainer.

But Obama, in an interview last week with a Nebraska TV station expressed concern about the threat to the environment.

"We don't want, for example, aquifers that are adversely affected. Folks in Nebraska obviously would be directly impacted. And so we want to make sure that we are taking the long view on these issues," Obama said at the time.

"I think folks in Nebraska, like all (those) across the country, aren't going to say to themselves, 'We'll take a few thousand jobs if it means that our kids are potentially drinking water that would damage their health,' or if rich land that is so important to agriculture in Nebraska ends up being adversely affected."

The tension between Canada and the U.S. over the pipeline comes amid signs in recent months of other problems between the two governments.

A long-promised announcement on a perimeter security deal for the Canada-U.S. border has been stuck in limbo.

Harper and Obama announced with great flourish at a White House ceremony in February that the two countries had begun negotiations on a plan to improve security and speed up the flow of cross-border traffic.

In June, Harper said an action plan for the deal would be released by the end of summer.

No announcement has been made yet.

Also this fall, the Obama administration angered Harper's government by tabling a Buy American jobs bill that failed to exempt Canada. Harper and his senior ministers publicly complained that the U.S. was resorting to trade protectionism and that both countries would suffer.

This weekend, Harper and Obama will attend an APEC summit in Hawaii of Asian-Pacific nations.

They will also sit down for a separate three-amigos summit, in which the leaders of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico discuss key issues of shared concern.

Harper has been a strong advocate for the Keystone XL pipeline and has publicly argued in favour of it this autumn.

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