

Business

Beetle-Bedeveled Keystone XL Needs Dead Rats to Let It Be

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Building the \$5.3 billion Keystone XL oil pipeline across the middle of the U.S. will require thousands of workers and millions of pounds of steel.

It will also require a lot of smelly dead rats.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service this month said that Keystone's proposed route across Nebraska put the endangered American burying beetle at risk. The agency said the black and orange-spotted insect could be spared, and the project move forward, if proper procedure is followed.

That means pipeline builder TransCanada Corp. will have to trap and relocate the one-inch beetles, using frozen rats that have thawed for at least three days for maximum pungency, according to detailed protocols U.S. authorities have drawn up to protect the burrowing bug.

"It's amazing that you have to go through all this time and effort to protect a beetle, but they do," said Michael Whatley, executive vice president of the Consumer Energy Alliance, an industry-backed group based in Washington that

promotes low energy costs and supports Keystone. “The take away is that no matter what t’s have to be crossed or i’s dotted, they are doing it.”

The State Department is still reviewing the Calgary-based TransCanada’s application to build the pipeline linking Alberta’s oil sands to refineries along the U.S. Gulf Coast, and a decision on whether it’s in the national interest is expected in the fall. The department has jurisdiction because Keystone would cross the border with Canada.

Birds, Squirrels

Approval from the Fish & Wildlife Service also is required, which the agency granted as long as steps are taken to protect the beetle, which gets its name from its penchant for burying the carcasses of birds, squirrels and other animals for later dining or as a place to lay eggs. The beetle is the only one of the 11 endangered and threatened animal and plant species the agency concluded would be adversely affected.

Endangered and threatened species have complicated other construction projects. Last year in Texas work on a highway around San Antonio was suspended after the discovery of rare spider in the work’s path. In Hawaii, the presence of endangered Hawaiian stilts and coots delayed a project at a wastewater treatment plant. In the 1990s, the listing of the Northern Spotted Owl as threatened prompted concerns it would hurt the timber industry.

Ripe Bait

The U.S. agency has left little to chance in its requirements for the burying beetle. For example, plastic, 5-gallon drums baited with dead rats that weigh from 275 to 374 grams (0.6 to 0.8 pounds) must be used to trap the beetles. If rats aren’t available, “bait items of comparable size and structure may be used,”

the documents say.

“What is critical is that the bait is ripe and emits a powerful odor,” the protocols state.

The containers should be buried with about five centimeters sticking above the ground, according to the protocols. Soil should be piled around the bucket to provide the beetles with a walkway to the top.

Once the insects are relocated, the company has to maintain a pristine worksite, where beetle hazards would be seemingly endless. The company must remove decomposing squirrels, rabbits and other carrions from within a half a mile of the pipeline’s path. That’s so the bug has fewer enticements to return.

Songbird Carcasses

Carcasses as small as songbirds are ideal food for beetle, “so this removal activity must be thorough,” the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service said this month in its biological opinion, which includes the trapping protocols. The opinion was a response to the State Department’s environmental assessment released earlier this year.

In an interview yesterday with Bloomberg Television’s Peter Cook, TransCanada Chief Executive Officer Russ Girling said he was “extremely confident” the U.S. would approve the project, which has become a flashpoint between environmental protection and energy development.

Given the green light, the company will take all necessary precautions to protect endangered species such as the American burying beetle as it

constructs the pipeline, he said in the interview for “Capitol Gains,” set to air June 2.

“If we disturb their natural habitat we have an obligation to restore it, or to mitigate by creating a new habitat for those endangered species,” Girling said.

TransCanada Hurdles

Supporters of the pipeline say the measures TransCanada has to take to protect a burrowing bug illustrate the hurdles the company is willing to jump over to build the line.

Biologists say it’s not a pointless exercise. By burying carcasses, the beetle speeds the return of nutrients to north central Nebraska’s sandy soil. The grasses that feed ranch cattle might otherwise have a harder time growing, said Bob Harms, a U.S. wildlife biologist based in Grand Island.

Nebraska is a “mecca for American burying beetles,” said Harms, who helped write the Fish & Wildlife Service report. “We want to have people out there who know what they’re doing.”

If not as iconic as, say, the whooping crane, another endangered species the Interior Department reviewed as part of the Keystone environmental analysis, the American burying beetle has had a tough run nevertheless.

The beetle once roamed the eastern half of the U.S. Its habitat has shrunk by 90 percent, according to the Fish & Wildlife Service. The beetle now resides in Rhode Island, Oklahoma, Arkansas, South Dakota and Nebraska, where the northern portion of the pipeline would end.

Sand Hills

Concern about risks to Nebraska's Sand Hills region, an array of wetlands and dunes that rests above the Ogallala aquifer, forced TransCanada to revise the route last year.

The path now pushes further east. That helps the beetle, which favors the sandier soil. Still, about 80 miles of the 875-mile (1,408 kilometer) route from the U.S. border to Steele City, Nebraska, potentially may affect the beetle, according to the U.S.

Harms said the U.S. now expects fewer beetles to be affected. Only about 126 are projected to be relocated at least three miles away, according to the biological opinion.

Part of the U.S. plan for the bug will provide a more complete survey of its population, and the Interior Department can amend its rules if TransCanada finds more beetles than anticipated, Harms said.

Training Workers

The Fish & Wildlife Service will require TransCanada to train field workers how best to clear an area in Nebraska. Trapping can only occur in July and August, said Shawn Howard, a spokesman for TransCanada. The company is unlikely to have its permit this summer, so building in Nebraska and South Dakota where beetles may be affected may not start for at least another year.

The company has developed contingencies and the beetle wouldn't delay the project, Howard said.

The government even specifies how the traps will be cleaned: with bleach and a thorough rinsing. The 5-gallon size is best because it gives a beetle enough room to flee if another beetle tries to kill it, a good precaution since “inter-beetle predation” goes against the whole point of the bug relocation program in the first place.

Once the bugs are relocated, TransCanada has to keep the grass and other vegetation around the site at 8 inches or less. The company should put shields on lamps if it works at night so as not to project the light, which attracts the beetle and can reduce their “reproductive success.”

Howard said it wasn’t clear how much the company would spend on relocating the beetle. It plans to have an American burying beetle expert on site to comply with U.S. rules.

“Worker education about the American burying beetle will be conducted on the right-of-way so they are aware of the presence of an endangered species and understand how to manage their activities,” Howard said in an e-mailed response to questions.

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