

Pipelines Encounter Stiffening Resistance

Residents are emboldened by North Dakota standoff as energy firms try to move glut of natural gas



The small encampment on Ellen Gerhart's property in Huntingdon, Pa., protesting the Mariner East 2 pipeline. Photo: Kris Maher/The Wall Street Journal

By Kris Maher

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HUNTINGDON, Pa.—As energy companies ramp up efforts to move a glut of natural gas with new pipelines in Pennsylvania and beyond, they are encountering stiffening resistance from property owners and activists.

Residents and activists have set up an encampment on Ellen Gerhart's property here, where the 61-year-old has been fighting against the 350-mile Mariner East 2 pipeline. A hundred miles to the east, a bigger encampment in Lancaster dubbed "The Stand" is going up in a cornfield in the

heart of Amish farm country to oppose a different pipeline. In both cases, the pipeline builders have said they have tried to accommodate landowners and avoid clashes by rerouting sections.

As the disputes rage, officials say the need for new pipeline capacity is acute in places like Pennsylvania, where fracking in the Marcellus Shale has created an oversupply of natural gas, depressing prices and hampering economic development.

A task force formed by Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, concluded last year that more pipelines are needed to move gas inside and beyond Pennsylvania. In February, appointees of President Barack Obama on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved four major pipelines in the state, the nation's No. 2 natural-gas producer behind Texas.

A majority of Pennsylvania residents support natural-gas development and the use of fracking, according to several statewide polls conducted in the past five years. Since 2012, a fee on natural gas wells has generated a billion dollars in revenue for the state. There are more than 12,000 miles of oil and gas pipelines in Pennsylvania.

But pipeline opponents say they threaten drinking-water sources and sometimes cut an unwanted path through private land, and they feel emboldened after last year's protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. That standoff galvanized Native American and environmental activists even though it [ultimately failed to block the pipeline](#), which is soon to be in service.

Ms. Gerhart, a retired special-education teacher, has been arrested three times trying to stop the gas pipeline from crossing her property, and her 29-year-old daughter, Elise, climbed a tree last year to try to stop workers from clearing a right-of-way. The Gerhart family says [Sunoco Logistics Partners](#) LP illegally cut 200 trees on three of its 27 acres to carve a path for the \$2.5 billion Mariner East 2 pipeline, which would carry natural gas liquids to refineries and export terminals near Philadelphia.



Ellen Gerhart with her daughter Elise, right. Photo: Kris Maher/The Wall Street Journal

“What’s happening is you have this quiet peaceful rural property being turned into an industrial zone against your will,” said Elise Gerhart. A county judge permitted the company to seize the land, but the family has appealed the ruling.

Jeff Shields, a spokesman for Sunoco Logistics, said the company cleared the trees after the court condemned the land. He said the company has negotiated easements with over 2,000 landowners for the project and seeks to avoid eminent domain proceedings.

“We will continue to follow the law in everything that we do, as we have with the Gerharts, and we expect landowners or any protesters to do the same,” he said.

Pipeline development has also meant jobs for people like John Carson, a 33-year-old laborer from Plymouth, Pa.

Mr. Carson has been helping build pipelines for the past nine years and said there has been little other work available at his union hall. Today he earns \$28.50 an hour working on the pipeline the Gerhart family is protesting. He expects to switch later this year to the pipeline set to run through the Lancaster encampment.

“The pipeline has been literally feeding my family for the past nine years,” he said. “Everybody is entitled to their own belief,” he said of people fighting the projects. However, he said he thinks much of the opposition to new pipelines is misplaced because they are better engineered and use advanced coatings that he believes make them far safer than older lines.

“I think most folks in Pennsylvania understand the benefits of pipeline development,” said Dave Spigelmyer, president of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, a trade group. He said new pipelines

would boost jobs in construction and steel and companies in chemicals and plastics that use natural gas.

Ms. Gerhart and other protest organizers say they have no quarrel with people like Mr. Carson who earn their living in the pipeline business. Their concern is largely with the way the companies use eminent domain to force landowners to make way for the pipelines.

[Williams](#) Cos., the Lancaster pipeline's builder, said it has also tried to work with landowners and has made 477 changes to the pipeline's route to accommodate people, said Chris Stockton, a spokesman. The 185-mile Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline would cross 10 Pennsylvania counties and feed natural gas into an existing east coast pipeline to customers, potentially as far south as Alabama.

Mr. Stockton said the company respects the rights of people to protest the pipeline, which Williams estimates would support 2,500 jobs during the year it is built. "As we're constructing the line, the safety of our employees and the public is the most important thing to us," he said. "Hopefully we're not going to have a confrontation."

Organizers of the protests, meanwhile, are trying to strike their own balance by not provoking local police and others in the community. In Lancaster, protesters won't be allowed to wear masks as many did at the North Dakota protests, local organizers say. Malinda Clatterbuck, an associate pastor at a Mennonite church who sleeps at the Lancaster encampment several times a week, along with her husband and two daughters, said the group won't allow tactics that could hurt their cause by turning off local supporters.

"We're residents who are living here who are trying to protect our land," she said.

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