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Corn, carrots, tomatoes and ... oil?

Dakota County organic farm fights to stave off plans for giant pipeline

BY FREDERICK MELO
Pioneer Press

South of Farmington, Martin and Atina Diffeley's 100 acres of cropland grow most of the fresh kale, thin-rind watermelons, tomatoes and sweet corn sold at the popular Wedge Community Co-op in Minneapolis each summer. Their organic produce also sprouts up in the aisles of Whole Foods, Byerly's, Lunds and cooperative grocers from St. Paul to Chanhassen.

But lately, the fifth-generation farmers have felt like proverbial Davids tossing kettle corn at one of the oil industry's heaviest Goliaths.

Koch Industries, which recently became the world's largest and most profitable privately held corporation, is midway through a state permitting process to build its second crude oil pipeline through Minnesota. The 300-mile, \$300 million MinnCan Project would bisect the Gardens of Eagan like a straight spike, slicing the Diffeleys' farm in half.

Because the Diffeleys rotate crops to keep their produce and soil healthy, the 125-foot construction easement would eliminate as many as seven fields that gross \$4,000 to \$70,000 an acre, depending on the vegetable in rotation. The farmers say the Gardens would close for good.

"We wouldn't have enough land to meet our needs," said Atina Diffeley, 46, standing ankle-deep in dinosaur kale. "It would really taint our name. It's an oxymoron — an organic farm with a pipeline going through."

Hoping to save the family homestead from its second major development tussle in as many decades, the Diffeleys are scrambling to persuade the Koch-backed Minnesota Pipe Line Co. to steer clear of their property.

With construction expected to begin next summer and to be completed by early 2008, the pipeline group maintains the new route will benefit the Midwest by drawing as many as 165,000 barrels of Canadian oil per day.

A 51-year-old pipeline, also operated by Koch, carries about 300,000 barrels daily to Twin Cities refineries but is expected to reach capacity by 2007.

"The main goal of this project is to stabilize fuel supply in Minnesota," said Patricia Dunn, a spokeswoman with St. Paul-based Goff and Howard, the public relations firm representing the pipeline company. "While there are so many factors that go into gas prices, a more stable fuel supply can only help."

In case they're unable to persuade the company to move the route well north of their farm, at 25498 Highview Ave., the Diffeleys are working on a potential compromise that would weave the line through a smaller corner of their land. No matter what the outcome, the farmers say, the negotiations could be a bellwether for the state's outlook on the unique needs of organic farms, which are proliferating across Minnesota.

The company's "first effort was, 'can we give you some money?'" said Paula Maccabee, a public interest attorney and former St. Paul City Council member who is representing the Diffeleys in legal talks with the pipeline group. "The message my client gave really clearly was this isn't about the money. This is about protecting the farm."

The husband-and-wife growers believe the pipeline project would immediately destroy 6 acres of their fields, shearing off a wide layer of topsoil that might never regain the same level of fertility



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without the chemical fertilizers they've taken pains to avoid.

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"We don't know how long it would take to restore the soil to current productive levels after pipeline construction or even whether such restoration would be possible," the couple wrote in an affidavit to the Public Utilities Commission, the state agency evaluating the project.

The Diffeys feel like they're experiencing déjà vu. When a school district demanded part of their Eagan operation for a new building, the family was forced to close the original Gardens of Eagan in 1989. They rented land at different sites during the three years it took to prepare the current Eureka Township farm for planting. It officially opened in 1994. First certified 32 years ago, the Gardens is one of the oldest certified organic farms in the country.

With a letter-writing campaign under way by the Diffeys and the Wedge Co-op, more than 1,000 Gardens of Eagan customers have expressed their concern to the utilities commission and the state Office of Administrative Hearings. Judge Beverly Heydinger will host a series of public hearings throughout the 13 counties affected by the project in August and September.

"That's just been beautiful to read, people talking about their children being raised on organic food, and people with immune deficiencies saying they absolutely rely on organics," said Barth Anderson, the Wedge's research and development coordinator.

Fearing similar run-ins, organic farmers are urging the state Department of Agriculture to recommend new standards that would better protect their industry from the MinnCan Project and future pipelines. In addition to the Gardens of Eagan, the route would travel through an organic dairy farm in Stearns County and an organic crop farm in McLeod County.

The suggested precautions include having construction crews wash their vehicles' tires before rolling onto an organic farm and barring crews from refueling on the premises.

Other landowners and municipal leaders in the 13 counties that could be affected by the proposal are equally concerned.

After tapping into an existing line in Clearbrook, Minn., the hook-shaped route would follow a southwesterly slope through Morrison, Stearns, McCleod, Carver, Sibley and Scott counties before changing course and burrowing north into Dakota County, ending at the Flint Hills Refinery in Rosemount.

The refinery turns oil into gasoline and diesel fuel for Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and North and South Dakota. Demand in these states totals 21 million gallons of gasoline per day and 11 million gallons of diesel fuel, said Flint Hills communications manager John Hofland.

As an alternate route, some landowners are urging the MinnCan Project to steer clear of those rural communities and build the new route alongside the company's existing line, which stretches from Clearbrook to Rosemount by way of Anoka and Washington counties.

But the fast pace of development in the northern suburbs has the pipeline's backers worried they would have to pay top dollar for easement rights under that scenario.

"Since it was originally built, there's been so much construction along that route," Dunn said. "(In our proposal), we were trying to follow several goals, which were to avoid as many residences and farms and sensitive areas as possible."

The Diffeys said their family has been farming since 1857, and they hope to someday put their land into a conservation trust to continue growing organic produce long after they're gone.

"It really doesn't matter what they offer me for it," said Atina Diffley, noting she has not seen a specific offer from the company. "My long-term goal for this land is that it will be farmed forever."

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PUBLIC HEARINGS

The Minnesota Pipe Line Co. has proposed a \$300 million, 300-mile crude oil line to run from Clearbrook, Minn., to the Flint Hills Refinery in Rosemount through 13 counties. An alternate route that will also be evaluated by the state Public Utilities Commission would reach Dakota County through Anoka and Washington counties.

The Minnesota Department of Commerce will submit an analysis of the proposed routes to the commission at a public meeting June 29. The commission is expected to indicate whether it will consider these routes in an order issued by July 13.

Administrative Law Judge Beverly Heydinger will host 12 to 15 public hearings on the MinnCan Project in August and September. The meetings will be held:

Aug. 22: Washington County, if needed

Aug. 23: Anoka County, if needed

Sept. 5: Dakota County

Sept. 7: Scott County

Sept. 8: Rice County, if needed

Sept. 15: St. Paul

Written comments regarding the route must be submitted to the state Office of Administrative

Hearings by Sept. 22. That office can be reached at 612-341-7600, or www.oah.state.mn.us.

For more information about the pipeline company, visit the Minnesota Pipe Line Co.'s Web site at www.MinnCanProject.com.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission maintains a public hearing calendar at www.puc.state.mn.us.



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