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Organic farmers fight plans for oil pipeline

Proposal would cut one of the nation's oldest certified organic farms in half

Associated Press

FARMINGTON, Minn. - Martin and Atina Diffley's 100-acre organic farm south of Farmington, Minn., supplies fresh produce to co-ops and grocers from St. Paul to Chanhassen, Minn.

But plans for a 300-mile, \$300 million crude oil pipeline would cut their land in half and eliminate as many as seven fields that bring in \$4,000 to \$70,000 an acre, depending on the vegetable in rotation. The farm, called Gardens of Eagan, would close for good if the project goes through, the Diffley's say.

First certified 32 years ago, it is one of the oldest certified organic farms in the country.

"We wouldn't have enough land to meet our needs," says Atina Diffley, 46. "It would really taint our name. It's an oxymoron - an organic farm with a pipeline going through."

Carrying oil

Koch Industries, which backs the project, is in the middle of a state permitting process to build the line, called the MinnCan Project. Meanwhile, the Diffeys are trying to persuade Minnesota Pipe Line Co. to avoid their property.

Construction on the line is expected to begin next summer and to be completed by early 2008. The pipeline group says the new route will draw as many as 165,000 barrels of Canadian oil per day. Koch's other pipeline 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," says 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 can't persuade the company to move the route north of their farm, the Diffeys are working on a potential compromise that would cut through a smaller corner of their land.

The company's "first effort was, 'can we give you some money?'" says Paula Maccabee, a public interest attorney representing the Diffeys. "The message my client gave really clearly was this isn't about the money. This is about protecting the farm."

The Diffeys believe the pipeline would immediately destroy 6 acres, shearing off topsoil that might never regain the same level of fertility without the chemical fertilizers they avoid.

"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.

Not the first

This isn't the first battle the Diffeys have faced to save their farm. They were forced to close their original Gardens of Eagan in 1989, when a school district demanded part of their Eagan operation for a new building. Their new farm, in Eureka Township, officially opened in 1994.

Public hearing slated

The Diffeys and the Wedge Co-op have launched a letter-writing campaign. More than 1,000 Gardens of Eagan customers have expressed concern to the utilities commission and the Minnesota 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.

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"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," says Barth Anderson, Wedge's research and development coordinator.

Other organic farmers are urging the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to recommend new standards to 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 line would tap into an existing line in Clearbrook, then follow a southwesterly slope through Morrison, Stearns, McCleod, Carver, Sibley and Scott counties before heading 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, North Dakota and South Dakota. Demand in these states totals 21 million gallons of gasoline per day and 11 million gallons of diesel fuel, says Flint Hills communications manager John Hofland.

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

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