

Line 5 backers cite unverified claims of rising gasoline costs

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LANSING — Republican lawmakers in Michigan have argued the shutdown of Line 5 in the Straits of Mackinac will lead to skyrocketing energy rates for the state's residents.

The argument has been a common line of defense for Enbridge and its supporters amid growing pressure to halt the flow of petroleum in the pipeline.

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"Putting the pipeline out of commission would jeopardize both the affordability and reliability of propane while depriving our state of 14.7 million gallons of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel every day," said Rep. John Damoose, R-Harbor Springs, in a prepared statement Wednesday. "Closing the pipeline would have far reaching consequences for our economy, environment, infrastructure and most importantly, our hard-working families."

The recent bout of objections from the company's political allies follow the announcement from Gov. Gretchen Whitmer this week that the energy company was "trespassing" on state property due to its easement being revoked.

"Line 5 safely provides oil and natural gas to Northern Michigan and supports jobs throughout the state," said Rep. Ken Borton, R-Gaylord in a prepared statement. "Gov. Whitmer's decision to close the pipeline will hurt Michigan's energy supply and economic outlook, and I will continue to stand up for the people in our state who count on Line 5."

But many analyses — both independent and state-funded — have suggested the economic impact of a Line 5 shutdown would be less drastic, and that the impact on energy costs (such as gasoline) to consumers could be negligible.

Line 5 is a nearly 70-year-old pipeline which passes through Michigan along its path between Wisconsin and Ontario, Canada. It splits into two 20-inch-diameter pipes for 4.5 miles as it travels underneath the Straits of Mackinac, carrying crude oil and liquefied natural gas from the Upper Peninsula to the Lower Peninsula.

Relatively little of the petroleum that flows through the pipeline stays in Michigan — it enters the system from

another pipeline beginning in Alberta, and only a small portion of it is offloaded to supply resources to Michigan before it ends up in Ontario. The liquefied natural gas that is delivered through the pipeline does go toward supplying propane to some of the homes in the Upper Peninsula, but studies have shown there are other methods of transporting that fuel. And, if Enbridge's supply were suddenly cut off, there is enough of a supply of propane already in the Northern Peninsula to cushion some of the blow, regardless of those other methods.

The report, commissioned by the National Wildlife Federation and C.S. Mott Foundation, found that rail transportation could effectively replace the energy supplied by Line 5 while increasing the price only by about 5 cents per gallon.

The impact to the economy would also depend on how quickly the new alternative were out into place, and many say that work is well underway.

"The UP Energy Task Force was created in June 2019 to formulate alternative solutions for meeting the UP's energy needs," said Jennifer McKay, policy director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council. "The Revocation and Termination Order was issued 180 days ago, which provided notice for not only Enbridge, but all companies to make modifications in preparation of a Line 5 shutdown. Furthermore, Enbridge has had years to think about the long-term decommissioning of Line 5."

Opponents of Line 5 also say the economic impact of an oil spill in the Great Lakes would be far greater than the impact of shutting down line 5.

"It's the magnitude of the harm that could basically ruin the public trust resource forever," said Oday Salim, an environmental law expert from the University of Michigan. "These things don't return to the way they were, at least not on a human timescale — maybe in a billion years."