

The big pipeline: Focus on impact

There seems little doubt that the Interior Department's nine-volume, 25-pound study of the proposed Alaska pipeline is, in the words of Under Secretary William T. Pecora, "the most thorough, complete environmental impact statement ever prepared."

Pecora released the voluminous report at a press conference this week with a definite air of satisfaction. "The work represents an effort equal to the Twelve Labors of Hercules," he said. He added it had cost the Government about \$9 million.

Conservationists immediately replied that such quantitative arguments have little to do with whether or not the Alaska environment will truly be protected. They issued an immediate call for further public hearings on the whole subject. They argued that since the report is new, the public must have a right to comment before a permit is granted to Alyeska, the oil company consortium that would build the pipeline. Pecora replied that further hearings would be a "circus" and "would interfere with a more thoughtful and rational analysis." Although Pecora avoided any explicit predictions about whether Interior would issue Alyeska a permit at the end of a statutory 45-day period (during which the Council on Environmental Quality will examine the report) it was clear he favored the originally proposed, 800-mile, Prudhoe Bay-to-Valdez route for the huge project. "The pipeline can be built to minimize environmental impact," he asserted.

Conservation groups, gathering Monday night after the press conference to map out anti-pipeline strategy, emphasized that "minimize" is a relative word. They agree that the scrupulous concern for the environment that apparently went into the report would probably be matched by Alyeska and Interior during construction and operation. The problem, in their view, is whether even the most rigid environmental constraints can protect the delicate, sometimes earthquake-prone, ecosystems over or under which the pipeline would pass.

"The pipeline can probably be built safely," said James W. Kross, an environmental geologist with the Alaska Environmental Institute, "but maybe not. . . . A comparison would be to say that it is about as safe as driving your car." Kross, however, conceded that there may be no way to halt the giant project absolutely, and his main concern is with the marine environment of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska, which tankers would ply enroute to the West Coast from the

Valdez terminus of the pipeline. "Prince William Sound is some of the roughest water anywhere," he said, "and the Gulf of Alaska has dozens of ships on its bottom." Some two million barrels of oil daily might be hauled by tankers, "and it would take only one ship breaking up in the 90- to 100-mile-per-hour winds that are common there to completely destroy Prince William Sound." Kross suggested that instead of taking the Prudhoe Bay-Valdez route, the oil companies integrate the pipeline project with a planned natural gas line that would take the same route from Prudhoe Bay to Fairbanks, but then would veer eastward along the route of the Alcan Highway to Edmonton in Alberta. There it would connect with existing oil and gas lines to the West Coast and Midwest.

This proposal is likely to be one mainstay of the conservationists. The other is to leave the oil in the ground until some new and safer technology is found for getting it to market, such as gasifying the oil at wellhead. But Pecora suggested in a reply to a question at the press conference that the Canadian route is not economically feasible. What he may have meant, said Kross, is that the pipe for the Prudhoe Bay-Valdez line has already been purchased; taking the longer route to Edmonton would require purchase of considerably more pipe. Because of inflation, the pipe already purchased appreciates at a high rate, and buying the additional pipe would be extremely costly.

There are many apparent concessions to the environmentalists in the Interior study. For instance, 350 miles of pipeline would be above ground to prevent permafrost from coming into contact with the hot pipeline (the oil would be about 170 degrees F.) and to protect against consequent erosion. About 150 miles would be on "berms," gravel embankments similar to those railroad tracks run on; another 200 miles would be on piles driven deep into the permafrost.

According to Kross, the embankments might cause as much difficulty as they would prevent: Gravel would sometimes have to be taken from river bottoms, with possible damage to aquatic ecosystems, then hauled to the construction site in vehicles that would gouge tracks in the tundra. Along certain northern segments of the route, says the report, a major impact would be the consumption of large quantities of gravel. "Permafrost would undoubtedly thaw locally causing settlement of the gravel berm," says the report, "and if settlement were severe, unless prompt maintenance could be done, the pipe could be damaged." And the report agrees with Kross that taking gravel from stream channels or from

flood plains could cause severe erosion and damage to stream ecosystems. It is apparent the report is not, as some conservationists had feared, a sellout to the oil companies.

The gravel problem is just one of dozens. Another is ice "wedges," underground spreading of ice from surface water seepage which, when melted, could create gaping craters and runaway erosion (Kross says core drilling at stipulated mile or half-mile intervals cannot possibly detect all the wedges). Another is the proneness of much of the southern part of the proposed route to earthquakes. Another is the possibility of oil from a break flowing into the stream channels along which major parts of the pipeline would be built.

Three volumes of the report are on economic and security aspects of the pipeline, and this is another area where conservationists are attacking. At the rate of two million barrels daily, the Alaska oil will last about four to seven years. Given current exponential growth in energy consumption, the Alaska oil is "a drop in the bucket" in terms of national or world consumption, say conservationists. Now may be the time, suggested Raye-Page of the Wilderness Society, simply to stop. A little-considered alternative, she said, "is don't build a pipeline at all." Added a Sierra Club representative, linking the Alaska problems to the problems of the lower 48 states: "We don't need any more smog and we don't need any more oil spills." □

Estimating the cost of auto emission controls

Economists have criticized the 1975 and 1976 automobile emission standards, asserting they are based on no real analysis of costs and benefits (SN: 11/13/71, p. 332). In a report issued last weekend, the President's Office of Science and Technology agreed. The standards, included in Sen. Edmund Muskie's 1970 Clean Air Amendments, would, say the panelists who prepared the report, add \$755 to the retail price of the average car. A major target of the report was 1976 nitrogen oxide (NO_x) standards. The committee suggested the limit be raised from 0.4 grams per mile to from 1 to 2 grams. The reason: Cars would be used either in areas where NO_x is no problem, or in areas where so much NO_x comes from power plants and other stationary sources that it would do no good to scrub so much out of auto emissions.

Muskie attacked the report as pro-auto company and Ralph Nader called it a "sellout." But other environmentalists say it strengthens their argument for removing automobiles from cities. □