

Enbridge's tunnel plan must clear hurdle

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MACKINAW CITY — Before Enbridge can build a tunnel beneath the Straits of Mackinac, it will need an environmental impact statement from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The decision will almost certainly hamper the energy company's previous goal of starting construction on the project later this year. Enbridge has had a permit application pend-

ing with the corps for roughly a year. That step was one of the final barriers standing in the way of the proposed plan to reroute a portion of the company's Line 5 pipeline, which has a four-mile section running through the Straits of Mackinac, and place it inside a new protective tunnel that would span the straits.

But the Army Corps announced Wednesday that it will conduct a thorough analysis of the project's environmental impacts before making a decision.

"I have concluded that an (environmental

impact statement) is the most appropriate level of review because of the potential for impacts significantly affecting the quality of the human environment," said Jaime A. Pinkham, acting assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works, in a press release. "(The Army Corps) will ensure all potential impacts and reasonable alternatives associated with this project are thoroughly analyzed and will ultimately support a decision on the permit application."

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That process will involve a much more stringent set of review standards than the alternative, an environmental assessment, which would have been issued if the corps found no significant environmental impacts associated with the plan. In an overview of federal review processes, the Environmental Protection Agency calls for an environmental impact statement “if a proposed major federal action is determined to significantly affect the quality of the human environment.”

In its press release, the Army Corps says its impact statement will involve “meaningful and robust consultations with tribal nations,” and examine “all reasonable alternatives” to reach a final decision.

In a statement, Enbridge spokesman Ryan Duffy said the company will continue to cooperate with the corps, but also rankled at the resulting change in the company’s projected timeline. Company representatives have long cited 2024 as their targeted completion point.

“Project permitting continues to be the driver of project timing,” he said. “The decision by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ... to complete an environmental impact statement instead of an environmental assessment ... for the Great Lakes Tunnel project will lead to a delay in the start of construction on this important project.”

Enbridge’s tunnel plan came about in 2018 as part of a deal with then-Gov. Rick Snyder. Critics have long argued the 68-year-old pipeline, which spans both Michigan peninsulas on its way from Superior, Wisconsin to Sarnia, Ontario, poses an imminent threat to the Great Lakes, and have called for its shutdown. The 2018 deal, however, would allow the company to keep its infrastructure running through the state as long as it builds a protective tunnel in the straits.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has opposed that deal in court, and environmental groups say the risk of a spill anywhere in the state would still be too high, even with the tunnel.

Jennifer McKay, policy director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey, said her organization specifically requested an environmental impact statement in its comments to the Army Corps during the public comment period.

“The proposed project is in one of the most pristine Great Lakes coastal wetlands in Lakes Michigan and Huron,” she said.

She said the project could destroy populations of threatened or endangered species, disrupt waterbird migration, and damage historic and cultural features of the area.

“Hopefully through the EIS process, the USACE will see there are alternatives available to meet Michigan’s energy needs without any noticeable or significant economic impact to the state, citizens or businesses and that avoid significant detrimental impacts to our water and natural resources,” she said.