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Herald & Review (Decatur, IL)

November 16, 2008

Section: News

Page: A1

Good neighbors

Landowners happy with workers building pipeline through Central Illinois

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DECATUR - Mike Jacobs has been pleasantly surprised by how much he's enjoyed watching construction on the **Rockies Express** Pipeline. Jacobs, who lives near Macon close to where the pipeline is going in, thought the work might be different.

"At first, we were really nervous about them," Jacobs said. "You kind of brace yourself for a fight, and it wasn't that way at all once we got settled with them."

Jacobs and other landowners along the pipeline's path had to reach settlements giving the company right-of-way access onto the land before construction could begin. The \$5 billion, 1,679-mile natural gas pipeline runs through parts of Christian, Macon, Moultrie and Douglas counties on its way from the Rocky Mountains east to Ohio.

Construction this summer was delayed locally while a conflict between the Macon County Board and local unions against the pipeline company was resolved.

"Once work began, it's been really interesting to watch," Jacobs said. "A lot of mornings, I hate to leave for work because I want to stay and see what's going on that day."

Jacobs isn't the only one watching the project with better-than-expected interest. Emmett Sefton has watched as the land he farms near Dalton City is fixed as good, if not better, than it was, he said.

"I don't know what's going to happen when they leave because I don't know what I'm going to watch," Sefton said.

Construction on parts of the project is nearing completion, **Rockies Express** spokesman Allen Fore said Friday.

"They're almost finished with welding the mainline," Fore said. "That spread near Decatur is probably our best spread in the entire state."

Most of the activity on the mainline is expected to be completed as planned by the end of the year, with a target of having the line operational and gas flowing in the spring, Fore said.

"There still will be a construction presence into the new year," Fore said. "A lot of the major activity we will finish."

Work can continue even with cold weather on the horizon, but rain slows things down more because it creates muddy conditions, Fore said.

As work has gone on, Jacobs has noticed more workers in the area and has even befriended some of them.

"It's got to be a huge impact with so many people in town," Jacobs said. "The gas station I go to in town is always full of pipeline trucks. I'm sure it's a huge boon to the area."

Each spread of the project has more than 400 workers, with many of them coming from out of town and staying in local hotels, motels and apartments, Fore said.

"They eat and spend their money on other basic necessities that you do on everyday life," Fore said. "All of that adds up, especially when everybody's feeling the economic crunch right now. All those things matter, with extra customers and extra people patronizing those businesses, that helps."

Towns such as Tuscola and Taylorville have issued proclamations of special days recognizing the impact of the pipeline.

When construction is complete, area businesses will be able to access the gas from points along the line, creating a lasting impact, Fore said.

Once the construction workers have all moved on, too, farmers along the path don't seem to be expecting any lasting loss because of the project.

"They've done a great job," Sefton said. "The way they fix it, it's a lot better than it was."

Pipeline crews carefully have separated topsoil from the subsoil to make sure good farming remains possible.

"The next season, whatever crop a farmer decides to grow can grow over the top with no lasting impact," Fore said.

Those watching the project are even hoping to have something to remember it by.

Jacobs has been given some rocks that have been dug up along the way. He might have some inscribed and give them away as gifts or keep as memorabilia of the project.

"If the landowner doesn't want them, they've got to dispose of them," Jacobs said. "I've got some real nice ones."

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Herald & Review photos/Stephen Haas

A marker shows the location of a recently buried section of pipeline southeast of Newman. TOP, FROM LEFT: A Price Gregory contractor marks measurements on a section of pipe in rural Douglas County. David Hickman works underneath a section of a pipe. Dylan Elliot uses ultrasound to inspect joint welds

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