Environmental activists are shown as they march through midtown protesting the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, in New York.

ROBERT RAPIER: Crude oil and natural gas are both already transported all over the U.S. in enormous volumes. There is a 2.5 million-mile pipeline network underneath our feet that moves oil and gas all over the country. That is more than 50 times the length of the U.S. Interstate Highway System. These pipelines cross through national parks, rivers, underneath cities and above the nation’s aquifers—and there are pipelines crossing the U.S. border to the north and south.

In addition to that, crude-oil volumes shipped by rail have increased rapidly in recent years. While protesters were trying to stop the 830,000 barrel-per-day (bpd) Keystone XL Pipeline that would connect the oil sands in Alberta and the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota to refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast, railroads essentially built a Keystone XL on rail in about three years. Oil shipped from the Bakken formation in North Dakota grew from nearly zero to 700,000 bpd, with Warren Buffett’s BNSF railroad as the dominant player.

Further, there are oil tankers and barges that move oil from terminals in Alaska and on the Gulf Coast to refineries in California and on the East Coast.
It is a given that there is risk involved in moving flammable liquids around the country, just as there is risk in driving a car. If we use oil, there is going to be some level of risk in transporting it.

The question should then be, “What is the safest way to move crude oil throughout North America, how can we make it safer, and what level of risk is tolerable?”

Pipelines are historically the safest and least energy-intensive way to ship oil on land. The U.S. State Department reported earlier this year that if the oil destined to flow through the still-stalled Keystone XL pipeline switches to freight trains, this may result in an average of six additional rail-related deaths per year due to the higher risk from rail.

That doesn’t mean that rail can’t be made safer, nor does it imply that pipeline accidents are acceptable.

But the key to making them safer is understanding the risks, calculating the potential impacts, and mitigating these risks and impacts to the greatest possible extent. Naively blocking pipelines without reducing the oil demand is a sure way to make the situation more, not less risky.

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