

The New York Times

Green

A Blog About Energy and the Environment

SEPTEMBER 29, 2011, 11:45 AM

A Rancher Stands Up for His Scrub Trees

By *KIRK JOHNSON*

A group of Montanans who favor construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, even as they worry about what compensation they will receive in exchange for the project's crossing their property.

Eastern Montana, where the proposed Keystone XL pipeline would snake southward on its way to Texas, is not the Montana of movie fame, a landscape of deep woods, glaciers and grizzly-trod wilderness.

This is the Montana of cattle ranchers, wheat farmers and 50 -mile views. To the eastern Montanan's eye, the west slope, as it is called -- as in west of the Continental Divide, a marker of climate, culture and politics all in one -- is often seen as too green, too wet and too full of liberals who moved to Montana from somewhere else.

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The dotted line indicates the Keystone XL pipeline's proposed route.

But in [reporting from eastern Montana this week](#) on the debate over the pipeline, I was also reminded that the landscape here, for all its superficially harsh, dry appearance, is just as fragile as the timber and trout country beloved around Missoula or Glacier National Park.

Tim Hess, for example, a 65-year-old semi-retired rancher with 5,000 acres straddling the line's route, said that that an early map of the pipeline had it snaking diagonally across a sandy, erosion-prone part of his ranch that was planted in the 1960s and '70s with rows of scrubby trees aimed at holding the soil in place. He complained to Montana environmental protection officials, who he says agreed with him that by simply straightening the angle of the pipe a bit and going down between the rows, much of the windbreak might be saved.

But the map that was subsequently issued showed the same persistent cross-cut angle, Mr. Hess said. If the nearly constant winds here have their way again, he warns, the soils will go.

"We don't have that many trees in eastern Montana," he said. "We need the ones we've got."