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The Dangerous Game of Fear

There is no doubt that public persuasion and influence are powerful tools. But with that knowledge, comes responsibility. Fact-based evidence and scientific studies are the way in which our association chooses to engage Canadians about pipeline matters. However, there are others that prefer to create myths about our industry's safety performance. It seems the intent, or the tactic, is to instill fear in the public and paint our industry as irresponsible operators of critical energy infrastructure.

For the past two years, there has been a manufactured myth circulating that diluted bitumen is corrosive in pipelines. It began with a report created by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). This report tried to “prove” diluted bitumen is more corrosive than conventional crude. We know that this is not true, but it is easy for the public to believe this myth when the report appears to be genuine and scientific. The reality is, many of the allegations in the NRDC report are completely false, including the one about diluted bitumen.

For over 60 years, pipelines have been safely transporting oil and gas products underground with very few incidents. Most of the time, people don't even realize that they are operating beneath our feet. But, manufacturing a myth in the hopes of preventing pipeline projects from accessing new markets and ultimately contributing to our Canadian economy, seems to be a good way for these organizations to put fear and worry into action. And, given the advent of social media, in which the speed of information is measured in nanoseconds, that myth quickly becomes the assumed truth. It's no different than the telephone game you played as a child. The problem is, we are not children and this is not a game.

But, real scientists do not make up myths and they do not take things for granted. They are meticulous. They are thorough. And, they seek answers to tough questions with an unbiased point of view. Organizations, such as, NACE International, formerly known as the National Academy of Corrosion Engineers, is a good example of real scientists searching for the truth. Last fall, NACE International cited 16 studies dating back over 20 years, that compared corrosion rates between conventional crude and diluted bitumen. None of these studies found evidence to determine that diluted bitumen was more corrosive than conventional crude. NACE International is the most recognized, global organization dealing with corrosion matters.

In addition, an independent study completed by Alberta Innovates Technology Future, which engages scientists and other experts, many of whom are world-renown in their areas of study, concluded that there is no increased risk to transporting diluted bitumen versus conventional crude. And finally, if that isn't good enough, our association, the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, commissioned its own report, which looked back over the past 42 years and examined over 40 studies. The findings conducted by the UK-based, internationally renowned Penspen Integrity Group was that diluted bitumen is not more corrosive than conventional crude.

With all this evidence, one would hope that this manufactured myth would finally be laid to rest. But, even if our opponents were finally convinced that diluted bitumen is no more corrosive than conventional crude, other myths could be created in an effort to erode, yet once again, public confidence in our industry.

But, who is accountable for spreading the allegations and myths? If a company knowingly lies to advance its interest, it risks losing its license to operate. Companies are held accountable by laws, regulations, audits, and shareholders. In the public sector, governments are held accountable through elections, as well as, checks and balances for transparency and fairness like the Auditor General and the court systems. But, it seems there are very few organizations, such as the NRDC, being held accountable.

From my point of view, these types of tactics are fundamentally counter-productive to creating a rational debate which would help find the right balance between developing our natural resources, protecting the environment and supporting Canadians quality of life. In this regard, pipelines remain a fundamental mode of transportation to a modern and well functioning society. When you think about it, if you took a plane, a train, a bus, a car, a bicycle or even walked to work wearing shoes this morning, a pipeline and the products it carries were responsible for making that happen.

Pipeline operators that our association represents take their role very seriously in making sure they deliver oil and gas products as safely and reliably as possible. In 2011, our member companies transported approximately 5.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 1.2 billion barrels of crude oil and refined products. And, 99.999% of that product made it safely to its destination.

The bottom line is this -- the public deserves a healthy debate. At CEPA, we welcome anyone to challenge us. And, to be fair, Canadians should be challenging our opponents, as well.

For more information on pipelines, please visit: www.aboutpipelines.com

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