

CENTRAL CITY (AP) — Conservation groups, wildlife advocates and Nebraskans who live along the route of a proposed oil pipeline convened a statehouse hearing of their own Thursday, May 12 to voice opposition to the plan.

About 80 people gathered beneath the capitol rotunda for an unofficial “citizen hearing” to speak against the proposed Keystone oil pipeline.

The 1,661-mile project is designed to carry oil from Canada across Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. TransCanada also has proposed connecting it to the Bakken oil field in Montana and North Dakota.

Environmental groups have expressed concern that the pipeline could foul underground and surface water supplies, increase air pollution around refineries and hurt wildlife.

They also have speculated about what they consider inadequate pipeline safety and emergency spill responses.

TransCanada, the company that proposed the pipeline has promised it would be safe and reliable. Supporters say the project create U.S. jobs and stimulate energy production.

The gathering came less than a week after the Keystone tar sands pipeline in spilled 350-400 barrels in North Dakota. Most of that oil was contained in a berm around the pumping station, but some oil mist had to be cleaned from standing water in a nearby field.

Ron Bouska, who lives south of Stuart, said he wanted the state to impose regulations on a pipeline to protect his underground water.

“We have ponds there that our cattle drink out of,” Bouska said. “I have a lake right east of me. If we get this stuff in the water, are beef cattle going to be condemned?”

Similar hearings were held Thursday in South Dakota, Oklahoma and Texas.

U.S. Sen. Mike Johanns raised similar concerns this week in a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The Nebraska Republican said he was disappointed that the proposed route continued to be the preferred route after a review of other possible paths. Johanns said the proposed route could place the Sand Hills at risk, and asked Clinton to convene field hearings and extend the time for public input.

Johanns has said the pipeline has the potential to help meet the nation’s energy needs.

“I believe that the pipeline should be built on a route that avoids to the maximum extent possible the Sand Hills region and the center of Ogallala Aquifer, and the proposed route fails to accomplish that goal,” Johanns said in the letter, dated recently.

Nebraska lawmakers have introduced three bills this session—LB 340, 578 and 629—that would impose state regulations on the pipeline. None have emerged from committee.

Groups that staged Wednesday gathering included Bold Nebraska, Guardians of the Good Life, Nebraska Farmers Union, the Nebraska Sierra Club, Nebraskans for Peace and others.

The State Department is currently accepting comments on its supplemental environmental report on the project. The 45-day public comment period ends June 6.