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Kinder Morgan begins construction on controversial Hill Country pipeline

Houston pipeline operator Kinder Morgan has started construction on a controversial natural gas pipeline that would run through areas of the Texas Hill Country that opponents say are environmentally sensitive and home to eight threatened or endangered species.

During a call with investors Wednesday, Kinder Morgan CEO Steve Kean said the company has acquired 85 percent of the right-of-way needed for the \$2 billion Permian Highway Pipeline, which was designed to move 2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day from the Permian Basin to the Katy Hub near Houston. Although the project still needs permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on the eastern end of its 430-miler route, Kean said construction for the 42-inch pipeline has already started on the western end. Kean said obtaining regulatory approvals has slowed the project a bit, pushing back the expected completion to early 2021, from the end of 2020.

But the company still has a fight on its hands. Routed through the picturesque Texas Hill Country, the Permian Highway Pipeline faces stiff opposition from landowners, cities, counties and water districts working with the Texas Real Estate Advocacy and Defense Coalition, or TREAD Coalition, to get the projected rerouted. Citing safety and environmental concerns, the coalition wants the pipeline routed either south of San Antonio or north of Austin to avoid the habitat of the endangered golden-cheeked warbler and the Edwards Aquifer, which is home to several species of endangered salamanders, fish and beetles. On Wednesday, the cities of Austin, San Marcos and Kyle joined two groups in filing a notice of their intent to sue — the first step in the process to file a lawsuit against the Army Corps of Engineers and the Fish and Wildlife Service — to protect the Texas Blind salamander, Barton Springs salamander, the Austin Blind salamander, the San Marcos salamander, the Fountain darter, the Comal Springs dryopid beetle and the Comal Springs riffle beetle.

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