

Pennsylvania nuns sue federal agency over natural gas pipeline

The Adorers of the Blood of Christ are arguing that the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline violates their religious freedom.

by [Marie Cusick](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue

A group of Roman Catholic nuns has filed a lawsuit against the federal agency that approved construction of a major interstate natural gas pipeline, planned to run through the nuns' property in Lancaster County.

The suit, filed by sisters from the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, targets the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline and alleges the project violates their religious freedom, which is protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline is a \$3 billion expansion of the Transco system. It's designed to move Marcellus Shale gas from Susquehanna County in northeastern Pennsylvania southward to markets along the East Coast and to an export terminal under construction along the Chesapeake Bay.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission gave its approval to the pipeline in February. The pipeline company, Williams Partners, plans to install the line underground on the sisters' property in West Hempfield Township. The company unsuccessfully tried to negotiate rights to the land, and is now authorized to use eminent domain, and would have permanent rights to a 50-foot-wide area on approximately one acre.

"We believe FERC's decision to force the Adorers to use their land to accommodate this pipeline violates their religious beliefs," says J. Dwight Yoder, the nuns' attorney.

The nuns recently built an outdoor chapel on the property to symbolize their opposition to the project, and their efforts have attracted national attention. The *Washington Post* reports their strategy of using a religious freedom argument against eminent domain is relatively untested.

A FERC spokeswoman says it's the commission's policy "not to comment on, or speculate about, pending litigation."

In an email, Williams spokesman Chris Stockton says the nuns failed to raise these issues during the multi-year public process that led to FERC's approval of the project.

"The suit is a clear, collateral attack on the FERC order issuing the certificate," he writes. "Like millions of homes and business across the U.S., the nuns' retirement community enjoys the benefits of affordable, reliable natural gas service. Therefore, we find it ironic that the Adorers would challenge the value of natural gas infrastructure in the lawsuit, while at the same time promoting the availability and use of natural gas at their St. Anne's Retirement Community."

FOLLOWING UP (Updated August 21, 2018): The Adorers of the Blood of Christ sisters lost their case in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals in late July. In a statement about the ruling, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ wrote that the court panel "decided to side with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the fossil fuel industry over the religious freedoms" of the sisters under the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act. They are "committed as part of their religious belief and practice to use the land they own in a manner that does not harm the earth and recognizes the sanctity of life in the earth's current and future inhabitants." The sisters are exploring their remaining options, they wrote.

The original story above is from StateImpact Pennsylvania, a public media partnership between WITF in Harrisburg and WHYY in Philadelphia covering Pennsylvania's energy economy. Version of this article appears in the print edition under the titles "Pennsylvania nuns sue federal agency over natural gas pipeline" and in the Following up section.