The United States doesn’t have to look far to meet a good portion of its crude oil needs. In 2010, one-third of U.S. oil imports came from Canada and Mexico.

The relationship serves the entire North American continent well, according to Murray Smith, a former member of the Alberta legislature who now works in the private energy sector.

“When a nation (like the United States) imports three times more energy than it produces, it makes sense to go next door to borrow a cup of sugar or borrow a million barrels of oil a day,” Smith said.

As participants learned Friday at a CSG afternoon policy session, those two U.S. neighbors find themselves in very different positions when it comes to oil production.

To the north, Canada has plenty of “sugar” it wants to provide the United States, in the form of crude oil from Alberta’s oil sands. But on this side of the border, some have soured on the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which would bring more crude oil to and through this country from the oil sands.

“Four years ago, we thought it would be embraced with great enthusiasm,” said Scott Farris of TransCanada, the firm that wants to build the pipeline system.

A first phase had already been completed without resistance, he said, and the second phase would bring additional jobs and reduce U.S. dependence on oil from more hostile parts of the world.

Four years later, TransCanada is still waiting on a presidential permit to build the pipeline, and during that time, opposition to the project has grown. Some have said the use of oil sands reserves is a climate change tipping point, while in Nebraska, concerns have centered on the pipeline crossing through the Ogallala Aquifer.

“Stopping the Keystone project will not save the environment,” Farris said, “but it will preserve the status quo, which is something I think we all would like to move away from.”

To the south of the United States, the status quo is severely hampering Mexico’s production of oil and gas, said associate professor Miriam Grunstein.

Oil production in that country is falling, she said, as the result of a system that allows little or no private investment in exploration or the energy infrastructure.

“We might have a very strong fiscal crisis” if this decline continues, Grunstein said, noting oil revenue accounts for 40 percent of total government revenue in Mexico.