Slow and Steady Wins the Anti-Keystone XL Race

The southern end of the tar-sands pipeline is mostly completed, but the opposition is just getting started

SARAH LASKOW , THE AMERICAN PROSPECT AUGUST 15, 2013

Grace Cagle knew what Keystone XL's path through Texas meant for the state's environment. The pipeline was going to run through the post-oak savannah, a type of forest that's drying out, desertifying. It's one of the few places in the world where the ivory-billed woodpecker—one of the world's largest woodpeckers, a bird so endangered that for years no one had seen one alive—makes its home. Cagle graduated college at the end of 2012 and had planned to get a PhD.; she was studying ecology, biology, and chemistry. But she couldn't just sit in a classroom while Texas was in danger.

So, she took a risk. She sat in a tree. She stayed there while construction crews hired by TransCanada, the company behind the Keystone XL pipeline, came and took down the trees around her. In October, TransCanada sued the group she joined, the Tar Sands Blockade, along with other organizations employing direct action against the pipeline. As the company tried to stop the blockaders, Cagle found herself dodging private investigators and trying to hide her identity. The groups finally settled the suit the company had brought against them in January, and agreed they wouldn't trespass on the ground reserved for Keystone XL. In exchange, the company wouldn't pursue them for the $5 million in damages TransCanada said the activists had caused.

Now, Cagle is Houston, still working with the Tar Sands Blockade as an organizer and spokesperson. Along with other blockaders, she's doing environmental justice organizing in the city, where one fork of Keystone XL's southern segment will end. The group is working in the Manchester neighborhood, where nearby oil refineries spill pollution into the air and the families who live there have stories to tell about rare cancers, respiratory diseases, and children dying too young.

"We built a grassroots network of resistance to the fossil fuel industry in Texas. Which is completely ground-breaking," says Cagle. It's useful for the future, too. "I live in an oil and gas state. There are other tar sands pipelines. We have a lot of fights to fights. There are a lot of fish to fry."

AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, File

In January 2012, President Barack Obama promised his administration would expedite the permitting process for the smaller, southern section of the Keystone XL pipeline, while simultaneously denying permission for TransCanada to transverse the entire country, North to South, with its tar-sands transporter. That decision meant the fight over the pipeline would continue, but from Oklahoma to Texas, oil would start flowing. Not that the fighting stopped in the South—in Texas, activists were fighting fiercer and harder than ever. “To tell a story, you have to have escalation,” says Cagle. “The story has to go somewhere.”

Now, construction on the southern section of the pipeline is in most respects finished, and the story has to go somewhere else. “There's a question of what escalation looks like and what movement building looks like and where they intersect,” says Kim Huynh, another Tar Sands Blockade organizer and spokesperson, also working in Houston. “We're organizing in the communities where it's the hardest to organize, but also the most important to do in the long term.”

Blockaders have spread out, too—they're not all in Houston. The group is still out in Nacogdoches, documenting “anomalies”— faults that could presage a leak sometime later in the pipeline's life—in the portion of Keystone XL that's been laid in the ground. They've been supporting other campaigns too, like the Moccasins on the Ground tour—a community strategy led by Owe Aku, a grassroots group based on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, to keep the pipeline from passing through the Great Plains.

The Tar Sands Blockade itself is a smaller group now than it was a few months ago, back when the group was staging its most dramatic actions. That's how these campaigns work: when the work is most dramatic and exciting, people come. They volunteer. And then, later, when there are different demands and different project, the group whittles down to its core. The volunteers go elsewhere. They start their own projects.

In early August, the top post on the Tar Sands Blockade website featured the Michigan Coalition Against Tar Sands, which is fighting against the expansion of other pipelines that would carry bitumen from the tar sands. The Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance is fighting Keystone XL north of Texas. There are now groups in states like New Hampshire, and Maine that are organizing against local pipeline projects that, like Keystone XL, are intended to carry tar-sands oil. In the west, the Utah Tar Sands Resistance is fighting planned tar sands mines in the southeastern part of the state.

The energy that was focused on Texas is spreading.

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One of the main criticisms of opposition to Keystone XL has always been that blocking this one pipeline won't necessarily stop tar-sands extraction in Alberta, Canada. TransCanada isn't the only company planning pipelines—so are Kinder Morgan and Enbridge.

The campaign against Keystone XL, though, goes beyond simply stopping that one pipeline; the activists also seek to condemn tar-sands oil as a source of energy. Opposition has grown, not just to this pipeline, but to other planned projects as well. Anti-Keystone XL campaigners have argued for quite some time that their work has emboldened activists in Canada to oppose east- and west-snaking pipelines.

In their own ways, all of Keystone XL's opponents have worked to delay for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks, the moment when the spigots turn and oil starts flowing. This can look a bit absurd, if it involves, for instance, litigating the fate of an endangered species of dung beetle. Many of the tactics that established environmental groups are using are slow-moving: In Nebraska, a lawsuit that was filed a year ago and that could further stall construction of the northern section of pipeline is scheduled to go to trial in September—a big victory, considering that TransCanada tried twice to get the suit thrown out.

Even if the Obama administration gives TransCanada the permit it needs to build the longer section of the pipeline, from Alberta to Oklahoma, this will still be the strategy: delay—by injunction, by blockade—but delay, delay, delay. Every day of delay can cost the company money, cause investors to lose their nerve or their interest, and increase the chance that Keystone XL will no longer make financial sense.

By slowing down the pipeline's progress, anti-Keystone XL campaigners give themselves time, too, to find allies and to grow their movement. Protests in Washington, D.C. have attracted larger crowds. The climate group 350.org has tried to pull in students and towns far away from Keystone XL with a divestment campaign. President Obama has felt compelled not only to delay a decision on the pipeline, but to wink at activists in his climate speech, with his exhortation to "Invest, Divest"—which Chris Hayes called "the most crypto-radical line the president has ever uttered."

There's nothing cryptic about the radicalism of the Tar Sands Blockade. It represents one of the left-most flanks of

anti-Keystone XL campaign, plugged in to the rest of the movement, but not necessary turned on to its more mainstream tactics. “Some can say that we're a big bunch of scary hooligans, but that's not the case,” says Ramsey Sprague, a Tar Sands Blockade spokesperson. They've resented, at times, the energy that the larger movement has drawn from their work without taking the same risks: getting arrested in front of the White House is, compared to a tree-sit, a tame form of protest, safe enough for eminent climate scientist and celebrities to try out. “I would have loved if James Hansen had come down to Texas and chained himself to a piece of equipment,” says Sprague.

But more people than ever before are moving towards the view that direct action is needed. “We've seen an overall intensification of the fight around tar sands and also around the future of the fossil-fuel economy,” says Sprague. “The set of individuals that tend to support this type of radical action—those people's support has never waned.” Now, though, he sees support coming from more cautious, liberal-minded people, too.

In the long term, this is what the climate movement needs—more impassioned individuals willing to fight against powerful people and companies who are satisfied with the status quo of a world moving rapidly towards climate change. Whether the right tactic is organizing the most threatened communities or organizing voters who will scorn politicians who are wrong on these issues, there needs to be enough energy and enough people so that the momentum from a campaign like the one against Keystone XL can carry over to the next one, and the next.

“It's not just about tar sands; it's about fracking; it's about mountaintop-removal mining; it's about all forms of extreme energy extraction and fossil fuel production,” says Huynh. And it's about fighting other pipelines—the ones that could carry tar sands oil from Canada even if Keystone XL doesn't.

AP Photo/The Paris News, Sam Craft

"Today is actually a good day to be talking,” says Chloe Gleichman, a member and organizer of the

Michigan Coalition Against Tar Sands (MI-CATS), when I called her early in August. “Today we have someone up in the trees and stopping construction and clear cut of the areas in southwest Michigan and that's happening right now.”

In 2010, oil spilled from a pipeline owned by Enbridge, a company that owns and operates more than 3,300 miles of pipelines across the United States, into Michigan's Kalamazoo River. The oil that spilled was bitumen, the type of oil that Keystone XL would carry. Thirty-five miles of the river were closed for two years, and Enbridge is still in the process of cleaning contaminated sediment from the riverbed.

Enbridge boasts that its pipeline system is “the largest single conduit of crude oil into the United States.” In Michigan, there are two segments of pipeline that MI-CATS is concerned about—Line 5, which is decades old and runs under the Straits of Mackinac in the north of the state, and Line 6B, the pipeline that spilled in 2010 and which is now being expanded. Both are being expanded: According to the company, this is part of “Enbridge's strategic initiative of expanding access to new markets in North America for growing production from western Canada and the Bakken Formation”—sources of tar sands and shale oil.

MI-CATS formed early this year, by people frustrated with how little attention the pipeline projects in Michigan were getting. Some of them had traveled to Texas, worked with the Tar Sands Blockade, and picked up organizing how-to from that work. But most of them are informed, simply, by what's happening in their own communities. There are members from Detroit, where oil from the tar sands is refined and petroleum coke, a byproduct of that process, piles up along the Detroit River. There are members who were affected by the 2010 spill. There are members from the north of the state, where Line 5 runs, who don't want the same thing to happen to them.

Since the group formed, Gleichman says they've conducted “four flashy actions.” In Detroit, they blocked the way for the trucks that dump petcoke on the banks of the river. Those trucks turned around, and their loads didn't end up in the growing pile of oil detritus that day.

Another day, one member climbed inside a segment of pipeline that was going to be put into the ground scooting in with his belly on a skateboard. They hosted an action camp, training dozens of people in the skills and tactics of direct action: The camp ended with four people locked down to construction equipment on a piece of land that Line 6B was going to run through.

The tree sit was the most recent of the four. The tree-sitter is named Felix, and he stayed up there for hours. He stopped work for a day, and he managed not to get arrested.

“I think it's so awesome to see people becoming so bold with their action and their principles,” says Gleichman. “I think there's been a real shift in the last couple of years. Trying conventional things and seeing it fail—I think that has really radicalized people in a good way.”

You see this across the climate movement, as groups and people take their opposition a step further than they ever thought they would, and then a step further than that. Scientists turn into activists. Landowners in Nebraska who never thought they'd risk arrest go to jail. Would-be Ph.D. students turn into community organizers.

“For me, it's become a bigger situation than I first knew,” says Cagle. “There's so much more at stake here. I think that this will happen with other people who engage with direct action. Once you see the effect you can have, it's hard to stop.”

If the climate movement wants to convince America to give up its carbon habit, it can't stop. Not with Keystone XL, whether the pipeline's permit application is approved or not. Not with blocking pipelines, either: Tar sands mining could begin not just in Utah, but in Mississippi and Alabama. There needs to be enough energy so that spreading doesn't mean spreading too thin.