

SHUT IT DOWN



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How five activists stopped the flow of Alberta Tar Sands oil into the United States

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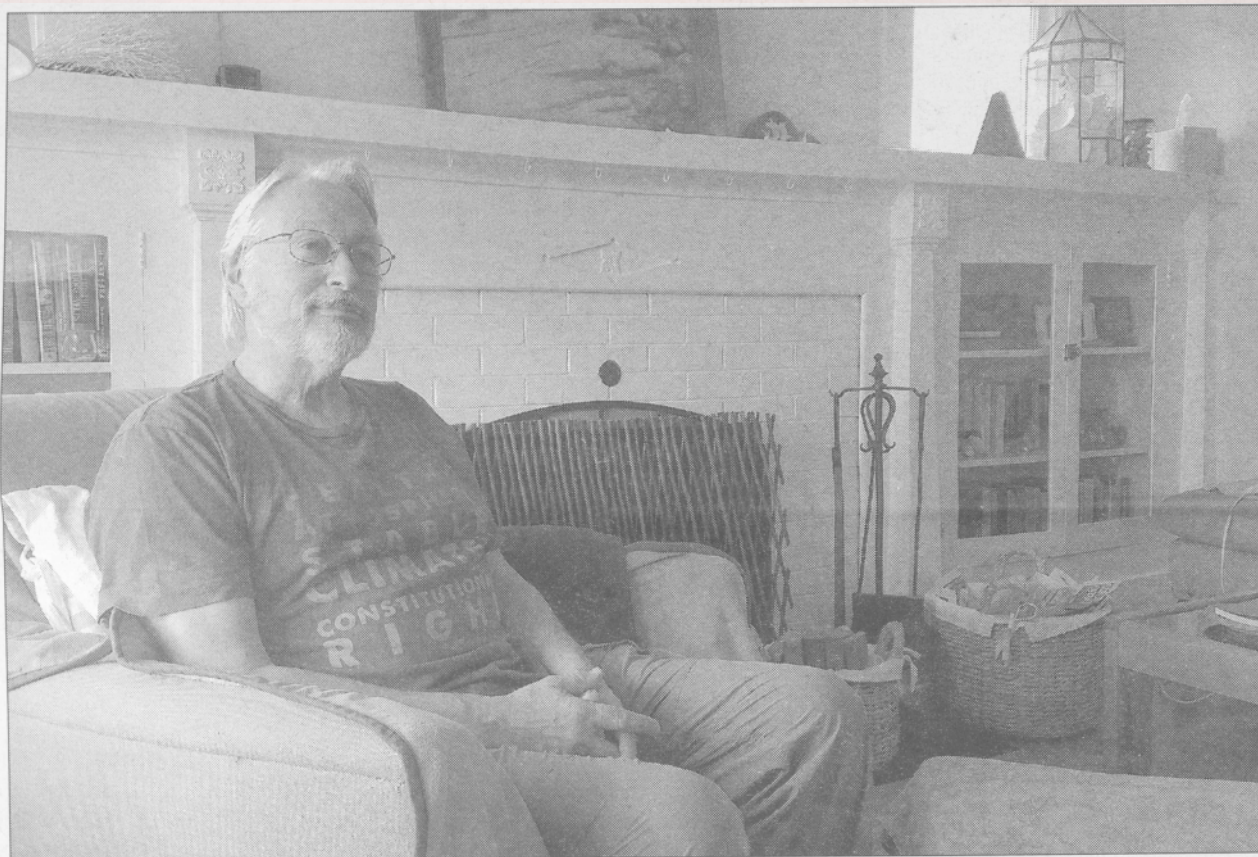


PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Leonard Higgins sits in his girlfriend's Southeast Portland home shortly after having breakfast Nov. 17 with his fellow Valve Turners, the group of climate activists who shut down five oil pipelines in October. Higgins faces up to 10 years in prison for his part in the shutdown. Top: The Valve Turners, from left: Emily Johnston, Annette Klapstein, Higgins, Ken Ward and Michael Foster.

Leonard Higgins was starting to panic. The industrial chain he was attempting to cut loose was made of case-hardened steel. It was thicker and more durable than chains he'd practiced breaking in preparation for this moment.

As he strained to pull the handles of the 40-inch bolt cutters toward one another, he was running out of time.

The muted glow of daybreak had already begun to spread across the rolling plains of north-central Montana's Chouteau County, revealing the snow-speckled farmland that surrounded him.

Temperatures hovered around 30 degrees Fahrenheit, but the 64-year-old was working up a sweat.

Now retired, Higgins had spent 31 years working as a project manager for various state departments in Oregon, including for the Department of Revenue and the Secretary of State's Office.

But on the morning of Oct. 11, he was attempting to break into a remote enclosure

that housed a block valve attached to an underground crude oil pipeline. The valve was just south of Coal Banks Landing, an old steamboat stop along the Missouri River.

The plan was to manually close the pipeline, an illegal and risky maneuver.

After what seemed like an eternity, he broke through one side of a link in the chain that held the enclosure's gate. But instead of relief, his panic grew. Other chains had fallen apart once severed, but this one remained steadfast.

As Higgins put all his might into repeating the battle on the other side of the link, a 22-year-old activist from Seattle, Reed Ingalls, held up his smartphone, live-streaming the break-in on Facebook. A documentarian, who Higgins won't name, was also filming on site.

Higgins knew 10 minutes had passed since the first call was made to Spectra Energy Corp., warning that a block valve on the company's Express pipeline was about to be closed.

He had to get inside the fenced enclosure and manually close the valve before sheriff's

deputies arrived.

If he got arrested before he was able to complete his task, it would blow an operation that had taken months of research and scouting missions to plan.

The chain finally gave way, and Higgins ran to the valve where he cut through a second chain, this time with ease. He began to turn a spoked wheel attached to metal housing and a network of pipes protruding from the gravel beneath his boots.

He watched an oil-flow meter as he spun the wheel clockwise. After 40 or 50 turns of the wheel, the needle indicating the volume of oil flowing through the pipe hadn't budged.

Higgins looked below the meter and discovered a dial with settings that read "remote" and "local." He pressed the dial and turned it to local, and that's when he heard a motor begin to run. The needle on the meter began to drop.

He had done it. He had closed the emergency block valve.

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