



Leonard Higgins works on closing a block valve on Spectra Energy Corp.'s Express pipeline in Montana.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CLIMATE DIRECT ACTION

The mission

(continued from page 4)

That morning, Higgins was one of five climate activists who pulled off the most expansive, coordinated takeover of fossil fuel infrastructure ever attempted in the United States.

Over the course of one hour, Higgins and his four counterparts stopped the flow of Alberta Tar Sands oil over the Canadian-U.S. border.

One after another, in 15-minute increments, they manually shut down five pipelines spread across four states carrying 2.8 million barrels per day of what environmental groups and activists have often referred to as “the dirtiest oil on the planet.”

Calling themselves “Climate Direct Action,” the group of activists also released an open letter to President Barack Obama that morning, asking that he invoke the National Emergencies Act to keep the pipelines closed.

They chose Oct. 11 because it was an International Day of Prayer and Action, the last of four such events to raise awareness of the Standing Rock protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

The operation began at 6:30 a.m. Pacific time at the “communication center” in Seattle, where Jay O’Hara, a prominent activist and co-founder of the Climate Disobedience Center, began placing calls to the pipelines’ operators.

First, a call was placed to the oil distribution firm Enbridge, warning its employees that in 10 minutes, two activists were going to shut down Pipelines 4 and 67 in Leonard, Minn., where they had pinpointed a location housing block valves to both lines.

The warning calls were made to give each company the opportunity to close its pipelines remotely, following proper safety protocols that would be less likely to cause damage.

Four supporters, one at each site, live-streamed the activists on Facebook as proof that they were on location and prepared to shut the valves.

A second warning call was made by activists on location to the emergency numbers that were posted on site, giving the control centers one last opportunity to shut the valves remotely before they broke into the enclosures to manually shut down the pipelines.

The activists, now known as the Valve Turners, each wore a hardhat and reflective vest – the required safety equipment for

entering the enclosures.

They all carried industrial bolt cutters, along with a chain and padlock they would use to lock the valves closed once they were shut off.

At approximately 6:45 a.m., Enbridge remotely shut down its lines in Minnesota, just as two activists from the Seattle area, retired attorney Annette Klapstein, 64, and freelance writer and editor Emily Johnston, 50, were beginning to close the two valves manually. It was the only company to shut down the lines remotely.

Fifteen minutes later, a mental health therapist from Seattle named Michael Foster manually shut off TransCanada’s Keystone pipeline in Walhalla, N.D. He had to use the weight of his body to crank the giant wheel, bringing him close to exhaustion.

Next came Higgins, who, despite his struggle with the chain, was able to shut off Spectra’s pipeline close to his 7:15 a.m. target.

Lastly, in Anacortes, Wash., Ken Ward, a 59-year-old from Corbett, Ore., who’s spent most of his career working for major environmental and public interest organizations, manually closed Kinder-Morgan’s Trans-Mountain pipeline at 7:30 a.m.

Each closure was followed with a live-streamed statement from the Valve Turner, explaining why he or she felt a need to take matters into their own hands.

Higgins had plenty of time to leave the enclosure before law enforcement arrived if he had wanted to. He and Ingalls both said it was at least 45 minutes before two Chouteau County Sheriff’s Office deputies, who’d been summoned by Spectra Energy Corp., arrived on the scene.

He showed the deputies the bolt cutters and broken chains, and he explained what he had done and offered a brief explanation of why. He said he wasn’t trying to defend his actions – it was neither the place nor the time for that.

Trying to get away unscathed was never part of the plan. They saw Oct. 11 as the beginning of a “year of action,” as their battle in court would be just as important.

What the Valve Turners didn’t predict was that six others – four supporters and two documentarians – would also be arrested and face felony charges.

In Minnesota, Brooklyn-based climate fight documentarian Steve Liptay reportedly received criminal charges in the mail, and in North Dakota, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Deia Schlosberg was arrested onsite and charged with three conspiracy-related felonies.

Schlosberg faces up to 45 years in prison for filming the action, although she asserted in a video for The Real News Network that she had no part in planning the event and was standing on public property while filming.

While the unnamed documentarian with Higgins was questioned and released,

Chouteau County sheriff’s deputies arrested Ingalls, Higgins’ supporter, after questioning and releasing him twice.

Ingalls, an environmental-studies major at University of Washington, said he was about five miles outside of Fort Benton, Mont., when he was pulled over and taken into custody.

He and Higgins traveled to Montana together in a rented Ford SUV after meeting with the other Valve Turners and supporters at Johnston’s Seattle home to finalize plans on Oct. 9.

The two rented a room at Pioneer Lodge Motel in Fort Benton, and they drove up the highway and a couple of miles down a gravel road the day before to time how long it would take to get to the enclosure. They didn’t want to get there too early, because hanging around could draw suspicion, and they couldn’t be late because the first warning call from Seattle was going to be made at 7 a.m. sharp.

Higgins was charged with felony damage to property of critical public service and trespassing, and Ingalls was charged with aiding and abetting those activities. They could each spend up to 10 years in prison if convicted – the lightest sentences faced among the Valve Turners.

A European-funded study released in June 2015 by the Polaris Institute found: “In the U.S., documents related to Keystone XL show that TransCanada had access to the highest levels of security services, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The company also worked to influence how local police forces dealt with activists, such as suggesting the use of specific criminal charges – including terrorism charges – against them.”

In North Dakota, it’s the Valve Turner who shut down TransCanada’s Keystone pipeline who faces the harshest criminal charges. Foster could receive fines of \$94,500 and a sentence of up to 81 years in prison – a life sentence for the 52-year-old.

ACLU Wyoming’s policy director, Sabrina King, said the arrests of those involved in and documenting the pipeline shutdown are just the most recent in a string of increasingly harsh prosecutions against climate activists and the journalists who report on them. In a piece she wrote for the national American Civil Liberties Union, she stated, “The worst punishment is reserved for those protesters who engage in nonviolent civil disobedience to call attention to the fossil fuel industry’s practices.”

She concluded that “the message being sent by these extreme charges is clearly directed at others who might consider protesting the fossil fuel industry and its infrastructure. And at a time when conversations around climate change and our role in it are more important than ever, that message is clearly meant to stifle the legitimate conversation around the

See RECONNAISSANCE, page 8

“The message being sent by these extreme charges is clearly directed at others who might consider protesting the fossil fuel industry and its infrastructure. And at a time when conversations around climate change and our role in it are more important than ever, that message is clearly meant to stifle the legitimate conversation around the role the industry plays.”

SABRINA KING,
ACLU WYOMING’S POLICY
DIRECTOR