

Reconnaissance

(continued from page 5)

Higgins was living in Corvallis when he retired from state government in 2010. He had spent much of his career transferring burdensome government application processes, such as filling out unemployment applications and registering to vote, to online platforms.

He said he always felt he was working toward the “greater good” but began to re-evaluate if he had made enough of an impact with his life’s work after his father died.

At the end of his life, his father “didn’t have any sense of contribution,” Higgins said.

He didn’t want to have that feeling on his own deathbed.

In 2012, he founded the Corvallis chapter of 350.org and has been actively fighting climate change ever since.

As the climate situation has worsened, his involvement in the movement has been increasingly brazen.

In December 2013, he was arrested for blocking the transportation of tar sands extraction equipment through Umatilla when he and another activist locked themselves to trucks carrying the mega-load. Their action was part of a larger protest and plea from tribes of the Umatilla, Yakama, Warm Springs and Nez Perce to keep the more than 900,000-pound caravan from moving across their tribal lands.

At age 61, it was the first time in his life that he had been arrested.

The following year, he traveled to New York for the People’s Climate March, and later he moved to Coos Bay, where he would stay for four months to fight the proposed liquefied natural gas export terminal that was eventually rejected by federal regulators.

In May of this year, he was arrested with 51 other protesters for blocking railroad tracks

leading to oil refineries in Anacortes, Wash.

When the opportunity arose to shut down a pipeline, he didn’t think twice.

These days, he splits his time between his hometown of Eugene and his girlfriend’s house in Southeast Portland, but planning the pipeline shutdown required three road trips spanning two weeks over the summer months.

With little accessible information on pipeline routes, he had to get creative.

Federal regulations require that when a pipeline crosses beneath a highway, both sides of the road have to be clearly marked, he said. He said he also knew that if it ran beneath a body of water that was at least 100 feet across, there must be a block valve on either side of it so that the pipeline can be shut off in the case of emergency.

“It was a matter of driving down miles of country roads, spotting these markers,” he said. “In some cases we just had to track along the route of the pipeline until we found one of those block valve enclosures. Part of what we knew was that the risk for spill was greater closer to the pumping station, so we looked for block valves at least 10 miles from the pumping station.”

He discovered each company’s block valves were manufactured to different specifications, with different shutdown instructions.

They even met with a former pipeline safety inspector to discuss safety measures.

“That’s where we came upon the idea to ask the companies to run their own protocol,” Higgins said. “The truth is, both the maintenance of the pipelines and the practice of the protocols do not meet the federal regulations. Enbridge, for instance, had 800 spills in previous years.”

Between 1999 and 2010, the Polaris Institute determined 804 spills occurred on Enbridge-owned pipelines. Additionally, the institute reported TransCanada was responsible for 152 spills from 2010 to 2015.

A full business day passed before any of the pipelines were turned back on, the Valve Turners said.

“The pipeline companies are basing their complaint on the value of the interruption in the flow of oil,” Higgins said. “They also publicly said there was no actual stoppage in the delivery of oil because of the storage

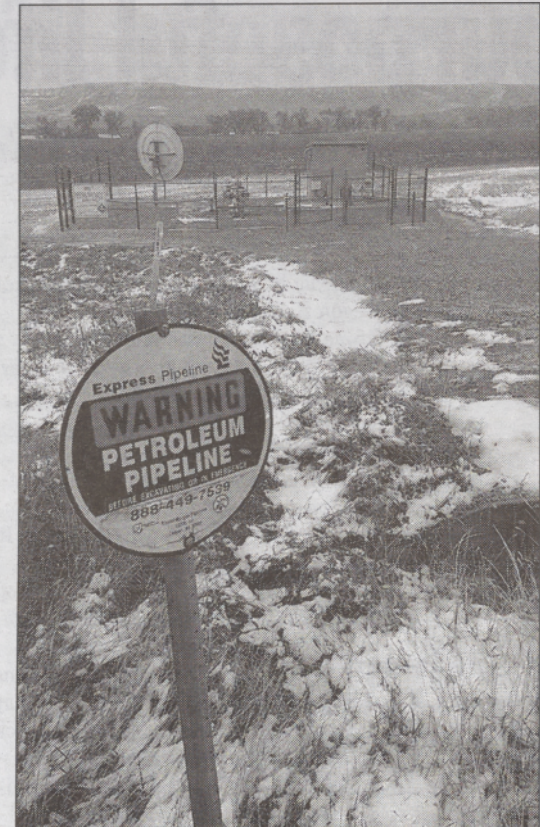


PHOTO COURTESY OF CLIMATE DIRECT ACTION

When a pipeline crosses beneath a highway, both sides of the road have to be marked, and when it runs beneath a body of water at least 100 feet across, there must be a block valve.

facilities, which is both sad and undermines their complaint about the amount of the damage.”

Although no one was hurt and no oil was spilled, industry experts and pipeline companies have released statements saying the Valve Turners’ actions could have caused significant harm.

The director of Pipeline Safety Trust, a Canadian industry watchdog, told Reuters, “Closing valves on major pipelines can have unexpected consequences, endangering people and the environment. We do not support this type of action.”

Higgins said the last thing his group wanted to do was cause a spill, but “we felt that the risk we took doing this is so much less than the risk of doing nothing in the face of the emergency that confronts us.”

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After closing the valve, Higgins chained and locked it in the off position.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE

1		2		3		4		5
6				7				
8						9	10	
12		13					14	15
16						17		

ACROSS

1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie.
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ____
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN

1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ____ appétit

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