

All the battles being waged against fossil fuel infrastructure are following a single strategy

8 August 2018, by Luis Hestres

The activists holding a growing number of protests against oil pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure projects from coast to coast are winning some courtroom victories.

For example, a federal appeals court recently struck down two key decisions allowing a [natural gas pipeline](#) to [cut through Virginia's Jefferson National Forest](#), just days before a [three-judge panel nixed two permits](#) for another [pipeline](#) intended to transport natural gas in Virginia because it would compromise efforts to [protect endangered wildlife](#). At the same time, [Oregon's Supreme Court](#) declined to revisit a lower court ruling that let Portland's prohibition of big fossil fuel export projects stand.

Just like when activists refuse to leave their treetop perches to stop oil companies from axing an old-growth forest or when they lock their bodies to bulldozers to prevent the machine from making way for a new coal mine, these legal challenges are part of a coordinated strategy I have studied for years while researching the [movement to slow down and address climate change](#).

Their overarching aim is to prevent as much new fossil fuel infrastructure as possible from being built and shutting down as many operations as possible. It's all part of a "[keep it in the ground](#)" strategy with "it" referencing [fossil fuels](#).

Keep it in the ground

This wide-ranging attempt to block oil, gas and coal infrastructure emerged after the American political system tried and failed to deal with climate change.

Although the government has enacted some [climate-related legislation](#), including measures that

help fund renewable energy and energy efficiency, Congress has never produced a comprehensive law to deal with climate change. The highest-profile failure came in 2009 and 2010, when the House of Representatives passed the [American Clean Energy and Security Act](#) but the Senate failed to take it up.

Climate change activist leaders, including the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council and other organizations, poured [money and time](#) into passing this bill – with nothing to show for it in the end.

Many of this movement's rank-and-file members reached [two main conclusions](#) regarding this failure. Real climate action, they decided, would require a broad-based, grassroots social movement. And the oil, gas and coal industries' influence over the nation's political system, through financial donations to politicians and other activities, was to blame for the lack of climate action in the U.S.

As one movement strategist at a prominent climate advocacy organization told me, a large number of climate activists at that point became determined to bring about what they called the [managed decline](#) of the fossil fuel industries.

They are trying to expedite the demise of the oil, gas and coal businesses through a death-by-a-thousand-cuts approach that includes several strategies. One is getting investors, including university endowments and public sector pension funds, to stop investing in fossil fuel stocks and other assets. When I researched this divestment movement with journalism professor [Jill Hopke](#), we found that activists were trying to chip away at the [moral legitimacy](#) of the oil, gas and coal industries. Another is fighting new fossil fuel infrastructure

through civil disobedience and litigation.

Keystone XL pipeline

One of the most high-profile examples of the keep it in the ground fight to date was the prolonged fight against the Keystone XL pipeline's construction.

A months-long protest attracted thousands of activists, many of whom were arrested by the authorities.

Throughout that battle activists successfully shifted the political terrain. They successfully transferred responsibility for the decision of whether or not to build the pipeline to President Barack Obama, rather than the State Department.

They also reframed the focus of the pipeline debate from jobs and energy independence to its potential to damage the environment and stoke climate emissions.

Soon after, a wave of protests on the [Standing Rock](#) Indian Reservation in North Dakota, raised the same issues – as well as concerns over the violations of indigenous rights.

In both cases, online activism combined with traditional offline tactics like civil disobedience and rallies.

With the Keystone XL pipeline, activists pressured Obama into rejecting the project in [November 2015](#). Although President Donald Trump subsequently approved it in [March 2017](#), the pipeline is [not yet functioning](#) and faces [additional hurdles](#).

The Trump effect

The keep it in the ground movement has gained a new sense of urgency during the Trump administration.

When Obama was in office, climate activists could count on the White House to share some of their goals, such as the [Clean Power Plan](#) – a regulation to reduce carbon pollution from power plants and factories.

Trump intends to [repeal the Clean Power Plan](#), has announced his intention to pull the U.S. out of the Paris [climate change](#) agreement, and has made encouraging fossil fuel production a cornerstone of his energy policy.

Because of this new political [climate](#), activists have concentrated harder than ever on local actions, such as [fighting pipelines](#) and other infrastructure projects, wherever they believe they can make a difference during the Trump years. This stands in contrast to their strategy of only a few years ago that focused at least to some degree on [influencing national policies](#).

Activists in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, have been staging [weekly protests](#) against fracking and natural gas pipelines.

In Portland, Oregon, anti-pipeline activists [protested the banks that are financing](#) the proposed Pacific Connector Pipeline and the Jordan Cove liquefied [natural gas](#) export terminal at Coos Bay. Protesters in Santa Barbara, California, are [vigorously opposing](#) an application by Exxon Mobil to restart offshore oil production along the Gaviota Coast for the first time since the [Refugio oil spill](#) in 2015.

Depending on what becomes of Trump's political career, this strategy may remain in place for years to come.

This article was originally published on [The](#)

Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: All the battles being waged against fossil fuel infrastructure are following a single strategy (2018, August 8) retrieved 18 September 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-waged-fossil-fuel-infrastructure-strategy.html>

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