

Will pipeline protests get lost amid the noise of the Trump era?

There is a lot to protest in the United States right now. Are pipelines important enough to make the cut?

By Tracy Johnson, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 29, 2017 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Jan 29, 2017 5:00 AM ET

There is a lot to protest in the United States right now.

In the days since the inauguration of U.S. President Trump, millions of Americans bundled up and hit the streets. The Women's March was thought to be the largest protest in U.S. history. There were demonstrations against the Mexican border wall, against Trump's broader immigration policies and, yesterday, against the ban on arrivals from seven Muslim countries.

There were also protests in at least four cities against the revival of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines. These anti-pipeline protests came together quickly on Facebook and drew hundreds of people. They were not as large and didn't get as much attention as the Women's Marches, but they did have a very specific goal, which was to remind fellow activists and the public at large that the fight was back on.

It's unlikely that pipeline protests will stop, but in the Trump era, they might not get as much attention.

When Jane Fonda travelled to the Alberta oilsands earlier this month, her visit was covered widely in the Canadian media and provoked the usual backlash among some Albertans. But outside an Associated Press story, barely merited a mention in U.S. newspapers.

- [A chronological history of controversial Keystone XL pipeline project](#)
- [Celebrities in the oilsands: The visits continue but do they have an impact?](#)

That may be because Fonda visited Alberta and held her press conference the same day that Donald Trump held his first news conference as president-elect. For the media, there were bigger fish to fry.

Protests need political opportunity

To create a social movement you need a grievance, resources, a collective identity and a political opportunity. President Obama was that opportunity for the anti-pipeline crowd. He was looking to establish a legacy of action on climate change and his rejection of Keystone served that purpose.

President Trump is looking to establish the opposite legacy, by expanding the energy industry as rapidly as possible. But that could also present an opportunity.

"Having a clear opponent in the White House gives you someone to organize around and a sense of direction and focus," said Dominique Clément, a sociology professor at the University of Alberta who studies social movements.

- [Trump's 1st week reshapes U.S. relationship with Canada](#)

- [The prime minister, the pipeline, and the lucky bounce in Calgary](#)

The day after Keystone XL was revived, Greenpeace activists climbed a crane behind the White House, and hoisted a banner that said "Resist," hooking their environmental causes to the dissent against Trump.

"You're seeing Trump attack so many different communities at the same time, there is the chance of divisiveness, as everybody is trying to protect their own rights, but what I am seeing is that people are coming together to support each other " said Mike Hudema, a campaigner for Greenpeace in Alberta and one of the people who brought Fonda to the province earlier this month.

He said the protests aren't entirely about changing Trump's mind. "It's about folks knowing our resistance to his ideas. It's so that state legislators and municipal mayors know they have support to stand in opposition to President Trump."

In Canada, Trans Mountain moves ahead

In Canada, two export pipeline projects also have federal approval. The most contentious of those, the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, is moving closer to construction, as Kinder Morgan works to satisfy the 157 conditions placed upon the project by the National Energy Board. Once it has done so, it will apply to the NEB for permission to begin to lay the pipe, something that is expected to happen this year.

Here in Canada we have fewer Trump distractions. The fight against Kinder Morgan is well underway, already multiple lawsuits have been filed against the project with more expected.

- [Keystone XL could be Canada's last big oil export pipeline](#)
- [Along Trans Mountain pipeline, opinions range from pro to protest](#)

"I think that's going to increase," said Hudema. "I think you're going to see an increase in the number of protests and you'll also see people who have taken the Grand Chief's pledge to do what it takes to stop these pipelines, including peaceful civil disobedience."

Civil disobedience or unlawful obstruction?

One person's civil disobedience is another's unlawful obstruction. In the days after Trans Mountain was approved, Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr [mused about using the police or defence forces](#) to prevent violence during construction. He said those words were not intended as a warning to protestors.

Dakota Access may be the pipeline to set the tone. It is likely to move toward construction more quickly than Trans Mountain or Keystone XL, depending on whether the Army Corp listens to Donald Trump and speeds up its consideration of the pipeline's route under Lake Oahe.

- [Kinder Morgan braces for Standing Rock-type protests](#)
- [Officers in riot gear arrest 28 in violent clashes with North Dakota pipeline protesters](#)

That will be the test of how the new federal administration reacts to direct action.

Dennis McConaghy, a former executive at TransCanada and the author of *Dysfunction: Canada after Keystone XL*, said he hopes after the due process, including legal challenges, has played out, protestors will accept the results.

"We know what the new federal administration and the North Dakota authorities are likely to do," he said. "They're going to enforce the law."

Dominique LeBlanc thinks even if the protestors aren't able to stop pipelines, that doesn't mean they failed. "The truth is that the vast majority of protest has to do with changing the way that other people see the world around us. It may pay dividends in four years, they're playing the long game."

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