

Big Oil vs. The Little Folks

by Polly Brewster
August 2012

1. In March 2010, the electricity went out at the home of Linwood Laughy and Borg Hendrickson, a retired couple in Kooskia, a tiny town in the middle of Idaho. Lin went out to investigate. A longtime resident of the area, Lin approached the guys from the local electric company with a slight wave and nod of the head. He asked what was up and they answered that Exxon had contracted the local power company to raise the electrical poles.

2. “What for?” Lin asked.

The workmen explained that the oil company was going to send some trucks up Route 12, but that was all they knew.

3. Route 12 isn’t just a road to Lin and his wife Borg. Rather, it’s an essential artery through the Clearwater National Forest, a vast section of public forest that surrounds them, and serves as the main road for a circuit of small towns—the road to get to the grocery store, a friend’s birthday party, or, on a bad day, the emergency room. Route 12 is tiny and designated as a two-lane scenic byway, running along sections of the legendary Lochsa and Clearwater rivers. The logging trucks that frequent its asphalt can hold up traffic for hours.

4. The couple went to the Idaho Department of Transportation (IDT) office in Lewiston to ask a few questions about the plan. The officials there were friendly, but finally advised them that they would have to initiate a public disclosure action to see the full filing from Mammoet, a Dutch trucking company hired by Imperial Oil, the Canadian arm of Exxon Mobil, that detailed the plans to move equipment up Route 12.

Lin and Borg completed the necessary paperwork and eventually got the 700-page document. They were shocked by its contents. “I was like, ‘You gotta be kidding me?’” Lin says. The loads Imperial planned to ship were up to 600,000 pounds, 225 feet long, 30 feet high and 27 feet wide. “One day I went out with a tape measure. There were places where Route 12 is only 25 feet wide and it isn’t like you have a shoulder—literally you can stand on the white line and spit into the river.” And it wasn’t just one or two hauls: the company planned on shipping 207 truckloads.

Despite Route 12’s narrow contours, what the document made clear was that the scenic byway was slated to serve as a crucial supply route for huge pieces of drilling equipment headed to the Alberta tar sands. But Lin and Borg sprang into action.

A gold rush of sorts is on in Alberta. According to a post on the Exxon Mobil website, “The oil contained in Canada’s oil sands is one of the largest energy resources in the world.” The company obviously believes this because it plans to spend \$30 billion developing the Kearl Oil Sands project, which has regulatory approval to pump out as much as 345,000 barrels of oil per day. In the first five months of 2012, oil and gas companies contributed nearly \$30 million to federal candidates and political campaign groups in the U.S.

Extracting oil out of the tar sands is a highly complicated process that requires huge pieces of drilling equipment to pull bitumen, a dense dirt-like substance rich in oil, out of the ground then shake it free from the clay, water, and sand that also make up the tar sands. Imperial hired Sungjin Geotec, a South Korean company, to manufacture the huge pieces of drilling equipment needed. The plan to get the equipment to the tar sands was to ship the pieces to Vancouver, Washington then load them onto barges and float them east on the Columbia River to the Port of Lewiston in Idaho. From there, the pieces would be trucked up Idaho Route 12 then into Montana and north to Canada.

The plan sounds simple and efficient. The rivers and roads were chosen because there were no height limitations and few overpasses—important factors since some of the equipment Imperial was trying to ship was as tall as a three-story building. The Idaho Department of Transportation signed off without holding any public hearings to ask the local citizens, like Lin and Borg, what they thought about mega-sized truckloads rumbling up their local highway.

In June 2010, sisters Susan Estep and Tricia Weber went on a weekend trip with the Womens' Donor Network and learned about ExxonMobil's plans to drill in the Alberta tar sands. Montana natives, the sisters were horrified by the idea that equipment for the tar sands would be transported through their home state.

“We had a de-brief after the trip, and I just stated that this can't happen,” says Susan, a partner in a capital management firm. “I was half a bottle of wine deep at that point, and maybe a little courageous, but I just thought this wasn't right. I come from a corporate background, and I knew we could beat them on so many levels.”

Also there that evening was Spider McKnight, a transplant to Missoula, Montana. She worked at advertising agencies in New York for 13 years, until she decided in 2001 to move to Missoula and give up the big city for Big Sky country. In New York, she had been an advocate and organizer for the LGBT community and she didn't leave her activism behind in Brooklyn.

The night with Susan and Trish is “when I got energized,” Spider says. “I was just starting my design firm and I realized I could provide a web presence to organize all the people that we're against these loads.”

Trish had a background in electrical engineering and quickly got started on hiring an engineer to make a report on the roads and bridges that would have to bear these drilling equipment shipments. Together the trio formed All Against the Haul, and provided an umbrella network for all the groups in Montana and Idaho that were fighting against the shipments. They gave the movement a place to meet, an online living room, but they still lacked a ringleader.

“When we got involved we knew other groups were already working on it, but we needed a face,” Spider explains. “I went to a protest for a group called No Shipments Missoula and I found Zack. He was the energetic young guy holding the bullhorn.”

Zack Porter was definitely young and energetic, but he was not only armed with a bullhorn—he was already in touch with Lin and Borg.

In teaming up with Zack, the women behind All Against the Haul capitalized on small connections, small gatherings, and sporadic moments of inspiration and created a strong, centered force—the kind of

force that can't be made by a well-funded political PAC or an expensive advertising campaign, because all of the contributors to All Against the Haul weren't in it for profit or political gain.

While Exxon Mobil and Imperial Oil were focused on getting the equipment up to the tar sands, another international company was focused on getting oil out of it, but it had hit a serious speed bump in Nebraska. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, the Nebraska Sandhills consist of 1.3 million acres of wetlands and one billion acre-feet of groundwater. But to really understand the Sandhills, you have to imagine a desert where grass sprouts out of high sand dunes—dunes that at times can reach 30 feet in height—a strange phenomenon that is due to the fact that this desert sits above a huge body of water called the Ogallala Aquifer, a vast underground freshwater pool that provides irrigation water for American farmers and drinking water for millions of Americans.

“About three years ago, we started getting sporadic calls from folks out in the Sandhills about this pipeline company that was coming in and telling them that they had the power to take their land away from them,” explains Brian Jorde, a lawyer for Domina Law Group, a successful trial law firm based in Omaha, Nebraska that previously won a billion-dollar price-fixing suit against Tyson Foods on behalf of cattlemen.

It isn't hard to imagine Jorde pacing in front of a jury, as his voice has the soothing rhythm and slight clip of a man skilled at cross-examination. TransCanada is exactly the kind of company that Jorde is dying to take on. It builds pipelines that move crude oil from the tar sands to American refineries. TransCanada is responsible for the Keystone pipeline, which begins in Hardisty, Canada then crosses the U.S. border in Montana. The pipeline then continues through South Dakota and Nebraska before turning east through Missouri and ending in Pakota, Illinois.

But, as Jorde and his clients know, TransCanada wants to expand the current route and create the Keystone XL pipeline. The issue made headlines this past January when the Obama administration, on recommendation from the State Department, denied TransCanada's construction permit. The main reason behind that decision was the fact that the pipeline would cross through the Sandhills of Nebraska.

To the citizens of Nebraska, the Sandhills is a sacred ecosystem, but TransCanada didn't quite get the memo.

“TransCanada just came right in and thought they could buy people off with money and a smile,” Jorde says. “When that didn't work, they tried to make people feel unpatriotic for not helping with the pipeline.” Their next tactic was threatening landowners with eminent domain, but some landowners in Nebraska didn't bite. “We're very pro-landowner in this state,” Jorde explains, “and when a foreign company tries to come in and claim that they can just take your land, we're highly suspicious.”

But as Lin and Borg up in Idaho, and Susan, Trish, Spider, and Zack in Montana, can attest, such sentiments are by no means held by folks in Nebraska alone.