On March 30, heavy rain didn't stop dozens of people in New Orleans from marching to the offices of the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR), where they delivered a letter to the agency opposing the Bayou Bridge pipeline.

Yet the group's actions didn't stop the DNR from granting the project's operator, Energy Transfer Partners, the coastal use permit (https://www.desmogblog.com/sites/beta.desmogblog.com/files/April%203-2017%2C%20BBP%20CUP%2C%20Consistency%20Determination.pdf) it needed a few days later, on April 3.

The proposed pipeline project is a joint venture with Phillips 66 and Sunoco Logistics. If built, the Bayou Bridge pipeline will be the last leg of Energy Transfer's Dakota Access pipeline, carrying oil fracked in North Dakota all the way to Louisiana.

However, the company still needs to obtain a water quality certificate from the Louisiana Department of Environmental Protection.
(http://www.deq.louisiana.gov/portal/DIVISIONS/WaterPermits/WaterQualityCertifications.aspx) and a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/bayoubridge/) before the project can move forward.

Protesters march to the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources offices in New Orleans to deliver a letter voicing opposition to the Bayou Bridge pipeline.
Brass band leading a procession to deliver the Bayou Bridge opposition letter in New Orleans.

Pipeline projects in Louisiana typically receive permits without facing hurdles, so the odds that this project will receive the required permits are high. When I asked if DNR had rejected a pipeline permit request in the last 10 years, Patrick Courreges, communications director for DNR, told me he'd have to get back to me on that. He explained that projects are more likely to be withdrawn than rejected.

That is one reason why a coalition of environmental groups and concerned citizens started to organize resistance to the project before the regulatory agencies decided on the permits. These people and organizations include the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Bold Louisiana, 350 Nola, the Sierra Club, the Gulf Restoration Network, and Harry Joseph, pastor of Mount Triumph Baptist Church in St. James, where the proposed pipeline would end.

"We are not protesters, we are water protectors," Anne Rolfes, founder of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, told the group gathered in front of DNR's offices on March 30. Rolfes credits the indigenous people who fought against the Dakota Access pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota for helping to change the narrative. Those fighting to save our water are "not protesting, they are protecting," she said.

Rolfes turned her megaphone in the direction of DNR's offices and warned the agency that if it grants the permit, she and others from across the country plan to resist.
“Water protectors” protesting against the Bayou Bridge pipeline in front of DNR’s New Orleans offices.
Harry Joseph, pastor of Mount Triumph Baptist Church in St. James, in New Orleans protesting against the Bayou Bridge pipeline.

Pastor Joseph told the group that the people in St. James “are sick and tired of being sick and tired.” His community, a parish located about 50 miles west of New Orleans, can't endure more pollution. Oil storage tanks already surround residences in St. James, and they leak fumes that are making the community sick, he said.
The Rev. Harry Joseph, pastor of Mount Triumph Baptist Church in St. James Parish, welcomed a coalition of groups opposing the pipeline.
On March 25, Pastor Joseph welcomed the coalition of groups opposing the pipeline to his church to strategize. Community members in St. James shared stories about what it is like living next to the oil storage tanks and a terminal where trains offload oil, a facility that was built without the community's consultation.

Many suffer from cancer and other health issues they associate with breathing toxic fumes released by the tank farms near their homes. And everyone I met suffers from anxiety about being trapped in the area if there is a catastrophic accident because there is only one road in and out, which could easily be cut off.
Keith Hunter at his home in St. James Parish, next to an oil tank farm.
Train terminal across from Keith Hunter’s home in St. James Parish. The trains keep him up at night, often offloading oil between midnight and 4 a.m.

After rallying in front of DNR’s offices, the group made its way inside to the office of Frank Cole, a coastal resources scientist with DNR. Cole was not there, so Rolfes called him, and when she got his voicemail, she held up the phone so the group could leave him a message. They chanted “Water is life,” as Rolfes explained why the group brought him a letter. Pastor Joseph prayed over the letter and slipped it under Cole’s office door before the group departed.
The letter questions the need for the pipeline and lists the reasons that the regulatory agencies should not permit its construction. It cites the woeful safety records of the companies involved in the project, the potential harm to the state's wetland ecosystems, and the increased risk of flooding which could result. And it also points out that the oil pipeline's contribution to climate change has not been evaluated. If operational, the Bayou Bridge pipeline would almost certainly increase the burning of fossil fuels, adding even more carbon to the warming atmosphere.

In addition, the letter asks DNR to consider the need for the pipeline. It points out that the United States has gone beyond energy independence and opened the door to energy export, concluding that the pipeline is not needed for those reasons.

Proponents of the pipeline maintain that Louisiana's number one industry is oil and gas, and that pipelines are the safest way to transport oil and gas.

Some, including former Senator Mary Landrieu who spoke as a consultant on behalf of Energy Transfer Partners at two permit hearings, argue that even if we have to move away from fossil fuels at some point, now is not the time.
Louisiana Governor John Bell Edwards told the Baton Rouge Advocate he wouldn't lose sleep over the project. “The idea of another pipeline traversing the Atchafalaya Basin does not keep me up at night,” Edwards said.

Three days later, the Governor openly supported the pipeline during a radio address on January 15.

“I support the pipeline, but it's because I know that the (state) Department of Natural Resources is going to make absolutely sure they abide by all the permit requirements, regulations and state laws,” Edwards said. “We're not going to allow them to build this pipeline as they were built in decades previously. We're going to move forward in a smart way, but I understand the controversy.”

But the governor's claim of confidence in the agency becomes dubious in light of the DNR's potential budget cuts that could force it to rely more on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to enforce regulations, and the EPA under the Trump administration is also facing major budget cuts. Furthermore, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is already ill-equipped to deal with enforcing regulations in the wetlands. It doesn't even have its own boat to inspect potential code violations in the wetlands.

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade challenges proponents' claim that pipelines are the safest mode to transport oil and gas by pointing to the increasing number of pipeline incidents. It compiled a list based on accident data provided by the National Response Center that shows Energy Transfer Partners and Sunoco reported 69 accidents during 2015 and 2016, 35 of which were pipeline accidents.

And all three companies involved in the Bayou Bridge pipeline have experienced recent accidents. The most recent, a Phillips 66 pipeline that caught on fire in Paradis, Louisiana, killed one worker and injured two more.

While many see the oil and gas industry as the state's economic savior, the same industry has played a substantial role in hastening coastal erosion.

The industry has admitted to its role in damaging the wetlands, hastening erosion by not following the rules of permits and sometimes operating without permits. Oil companies are responsible for 60 percent of Louisiana's land loss, according to some estimates.

On March 3, a federal appeals court ruled against reviving a lawsuit against oil firms by the east bank levee authority that was seeking payment for environmental damages which industry caused by digging exploration and production canals thought the state's coastal wetlands. However, several parish lawsuits against the oil industry citing similar issues are still making their way through the judicial system.

Gov. Edwards, who backs the parish lawsuits, tried to get the responsible parties to reach settlements with the state but was unable to resolve the matter.

The Gulf Coast sustains drilling operations, refineries, and a large pipeline network, which are vulnerable to coastal erosion and storms that are likely to be intensified by climate change. Rising tides associated with climate change impact Louisiana four times more than average because the state is already experiencing natural subsidence, according to a new study by scientists at Tulane University.
That is one reason why those opposing the Bayou Bridge pipeline are ready to dig in for battle.

“The Bayou Bridge pipeline is clearly the wrong direction,” Rolfes told me. She pointed out that just because Louisiana's number one industry is oil and gas doesn't mean it is sustainable.

Many pipeline opponents are not dissuaded by the fact that recent anti-pipeline victories turned out to be only temporary, including stopping the northern route of the Keystone XL pipeline and the halting of construction on the Dakota Access pipeline. They believe momentum is on their side, and that the time for change is now because the planet can't wait.

Opponents of the Bayou Bridge pipeline making their way to deliver a letter to Frank Cole, with DNR, in New Orleans.

Rolfes is meeting with water protectors from Standing Rock who are coming to New Orleans to share their experience. Although she holds out hope the project will not get the other permit and water certification it needs, if it does, she expects the coalition to grow ten-fold, as pipeline fighters from across the country have vowed to stop it.

“It's no surprise to us that the LDNR is issuing the permit; rubber stamping is business as usual in Louisiana,” Cheri Foytlin, state director of Bold Louisiana told me. “What they don't realize is, as much as we are fighting to say 'No' to this pipeline, we are also fighting for the affordability to say 'Yes' to clean energy jobs and the protections of our crawfishers, indigenous peoples, and landowners, and we won't let anyone stand in our way on that. Times are changing, we must change with them, or risk being left behind.”
Opponents of the Bayou Bridge pipeline outside of Frank Cole’s office with the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

Main image: Anne Rolfes, founder of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, addressing DNR with a megaphone in front of its New Orleans offices on March 30.
OPINION

Are B.C. Taxpayers Paying $3.5 Billion for Massey Bridge to Make Room for Coal, LNG Exports?

This article originally appeared on The Tyee.
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Op-Ed By Tom Baxter, a senior lecturer in chemical engineering at the University of Aberdeen.

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