

Stopping The Trans Canada's Keystone XL Pipeline: Activism from the Trees and on the Ground

By [Colonel Ann Wright](#)

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[War is a Crime](#)

Region: [Canada](#), [USA](#)

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It seems as though most Americans don't know that the Obama administration has backed off its commitment to stop a Canadian oil firm from bringing dangerous and toxic tar sands from the fields in Alberta, Canada to oil refineries in Texas. But in East Texas, the farm lands and forests have been seized for the Canadian company through eminent domain and are already being destroyed for the foreign pipeline.

Yesterday, October 24, Leslie Harris of Dallas, Texas and I visited the "boys" in the trees, the great activists who have been living in the trees along the Trans Canada Keystone XL pipeline that is carving a terrible scar in the countryside of East Texas. Earlier in the day we had been meeting with dozens of Tar Sands Blockade (TSB) activists who are preparing campaigns in East Texas and Houston to challenge the XL pipeline.

Activism in the Air

The Tar Sands Blockade (TSB) fellows are living in tree houses built high in the branches of tall oak trees next to the piles of sandy soil that has been dug up and mounded 30 feet high. Huge green pipes lay on the side of the trench sliced deep into the Texas soil.

Michael's Construction company has been hired to lay the first 90 miles of pipeline in East Texas. We surprised their security personnel when we emerged from the forest and underbrush virtually beneath the tree houses. Even though they are not police, the company security employees wear POLICE jackets. The security employees have set up a camp under the trees that the activists are living in, ready to detain them when they come down from the trees, or detain anyone bringing supplies to them.

We had walked through the oak and pine woods and the thick underbrush to the "No Trespassing" yellow tape the security personnel had set up very close to the trees where the activists were living. We brought out our yellow "Crime Scene" tape and put it up in a couple of places identifying the gash in the earth for what it really is.

We yelled up to two young men on the tree platforms, thanking them for what they are doing. After a few stunned seconds, two surprised voices yelled back.

When asked how long they had been in the trees, one responded, "24 days" and the second replied, "A week longer! 30 days!"

"How are you holding up?" we asked. "Fine, we've got lots of food and water, but we've run out of reading materials so we are re-reading books and magazines."

"Is it lonely being up there?" we asked. "No, lots of animal life — squirrels, birds, even a white owl. And lots of noise from the machines."

"How is the night sky?" we asked. "Strange you should ask, because last night was the first night we have not had flood lights shining up at us. It was beautiful to finally see the stars at night and to have some quiet time with no generator noise. But, they probably will have the lights on us tonight."

"How long are you staying up there?" we asked. "As long as it takes," came the answer.

Activism on the Ground

Earlier in the day, Cherri Foytlin, the wife of a Gulf coast oil worker and mother of six from Louisiana, chained herself to a gate at the Keystone XL pipeline storage yard in nearby Winfield, Texas and blocked six trucks from leaving the grounds. Under a banner that said "Defend All Coasts", Foytlin was arrested as her chains were cut by sheriff deputies with bolt cutters.

Cherri was threatened with a felony use of a criminal instrument-a chain and lock. Ultimately, she was charged with Class A Misdemeanor Criminal Trespass of a Habitation/Shelter/Superfund/Infrastructure, a new charge leveled at activists. Her bail is \$2500.

Prior to her arrest, Foytlin had prepared the [following statement](http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/10/24-9) to be released in the event of her arrest: <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/10/24-9>

By the time you read this I will be actively engaged in a non-violent direct action designed to bring awareness to the construction of the southern leg of the Keystone XL Pipeline, to this country's continuing use of our cherished Gulf Coast as the nation's energy sacrifice zone, and in defense of our Mother Earth.

Having spent the last several days with Gulf Coast communities that will be adversely affected by this disastrous project and after visiting with residents whose efforts to protect their communities, their land and their ecosystems through civil discourse and through the exercise of their constitutional rights and freedoms have been repeatedly denied, I am convinced that the choice to use our bodies as a shield in order to amplify the call for protection is indeed necessary.

It is time for us to take a stand, to take action, to join with our Texas neighbors and with our brothers and sisters from across the country, from Canada and from around the globe to say, "no more!"

Today I stand as a Gulf Coast resident and in solidarity with the [Defend Our Coast activities in British Columbia](#), where more than 60 Canadian communities are protesting a proposed tar sands pipeline through their region. We must, as a unified voice, defend all coasts and all regions from toxic tar sands pipelines.

The Gulf Coast is not our nation's sacrifice zone! We will not, cannot, sit idly by while our freedoms are trampled by a foreign corporation, we will not, cannot risk our children's air, water and land for empty promises of "energy independence" or "jobs" or in the name of "progress".

I come to you today, to ask you to join us – the Tar Sand Blockade, Rising Tide North Texas, and others, in our mission, and to solidify the Gulf regional voice.

I know that many of you may be unable at this time to join me in Texas or to commit to acts of non-violent action, yet there are other ways to support this mission.

- [Share this press release](#) with your media contacts.
- [Visit Tar Sands Blockade](#) to see other ways you (as an individual or organization) can support.

However you choose to support, every action is needed.

By taking action, it is our hope that environmental justice communities across the Gulf will be brought into the national spotlight in conjunction with this highly publicized event.

In closing, I would like to add that it is an honor to serve with you. I am proud of all of your work. Who knows what this action will yield, but I do know that this is our time to make a righteous commitment to each other and to our regional movement for justice for our historically overburdened environmental justice communities, for the people and ecosystems that continue to suffer the effects of the BP disaster, for the health of our communities, and for the people and ecosystems of our Gulf Coast.

God be with you.

In solidarity,

Cherri Foytlin

In an op-ed that appeared on *Common Dreams* on October 23, 2012, Foytlin talked about those living in the tree houses near Winnsboro, Texas:

The [Tar Sands Blockade](#) has been vigilant in their campaign of non-violent protest of this pipeline, and in doing so, these modern day patriots have also been protecting our freedoms. By building and refusing to leave tree house villages, chaining themselves to equipment, and working with landowners who wish to meritoriously exercise their right of ownership, they have valiantly defended our Gulf Coast, as well as our nation's constitution."

In 2010, Foytlin walked all the way from her home in Louisiana to Washington, DC to bring attention to the terrible effects of the oil spill.

Please read Cherri's [blog](#) and watch her Why We Blockade Testimonial Video <http://tarsandsblockade.org/>

Blockade on a Shoe String Budget

The Tar Sands Blockade is being operated on a shoe-string budget. If you would like to help support this important campaign, please see the website <http://tarsandsblockade.org/>

About the Author:

Ann Wright is a 29 year veteran of the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel.

She was a US diplomat and served in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war.

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