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## Climate: 'Keep It in the Ground' Gains Unnerve Industry

Climate activist Bill McKibben barely had time to celebrate last November when US President Barack Obama rejected the long-proposed Canada-to-US Keystone XL heavy crude pipeline. The co-founder of the environmental advocacy organization 350.org was already burrowed deeply into "Keep It in the Ground," his next ambitious, albeit connected, endeavor to stymie the combustion of fossil fuels by going hyper-local to choke off infrastructure. Considered a fringe movement last year, Keep It in the Ground is now causing jitters in industry boardrooms.

Whether warranted or not in these rocky economic times for fossil fuels, the nimble and inventive activists have claimed credit for slowing or halting construction of several oil and gas pipelines, drilling in Alaska's Arctic Ocean, offshore lease sales in the Atlantic Ocean, and oil and gas lease sales on federal lands. Regulatory reforms such as a recent pause of coal leases on federal lands fuel their vigor.

Activists don't just rely on social media to score their victories, either. Increasingly, they disrupt what were once prosaic events at obscure agencies by protesting in costume -- and with elaborate props -- at federal auctions and meetings. Jason Kowalksi, the Washington-based policy director with 350.org, tells *Energy Compass* that adhering to convention by submitting official comments to federal agencies or calling out members of Congress hasn't worked. "We've found that when we play by the rules, we lose," he explains. "What has made a difference is to be loud and in the streets."

Keep it in the Ground activists have the ear of Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, although the Vermont senator's Keep It in the Ground Act, introduced last fall, will remain stalled as long as Republicans control both chambers of Congress ([EC Nov.6'15](#)).

The demonstrators are accustomed to being dismissed as a monolithic lot of irrational Big Oil despisers. But that's not the case, they say. The planet is in the throes of a climate emergency and what unites many of them is not a hatred of fossil fuels but science and logic: Keep adding to an infrastructure that supports drilling and transporting oil and gas, and the US will neither meet its Paris accord goals nor prevent the severe consequences of a warmed planet.

Greenpeace USA researcher Jesse Coleman describes it as an intersection of the environmental and social justice movements, an intergenerational "energy democracy," of sorts. More mainstream "Big Green" organizations such as the Sierra Club have embraced the movement. "People are hungry for change," Coleman says, adding that Obama saying no to Keystone XL "showed a lot of people that if you're willing to stand up, something can happen."

Obama even gave voice to the activists' language when he nixed Keystone XL, saying that "we're going to have to keep some fossil fuels in the ground rather than burn them" to prevent the earth from becoming both inhospitable and uninhabitable ([EC Nov.13'15](#)). Activists subscribe to the science that 80% of coal, half of gas and a third of oil in global reserves need to remain untouched to keep the Earth's temperature from rising above the 2°C bar set in Paris.

"The old idea that the [fossil fuel industry] rules the country, so we have to do things that are not palatable, is not OK anymore," explains Janet Redman, policy program director of the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies. "There's a growing sentiment that we need to take back our economy and build one that is low-emitting and also

good for people's health, pocketbooks and well-being."

Rebecca Watson, a Colorado-based energy attorney with Welborn Sullivan Meck & Tooley, has watched Keep It in the Ground gain momentum. She oversaw land and minerals management at the Department of the Interior under the administration of former President George W. Bush. "I find the idea dangerous in its simplicity," Watson says. "It's going to be a mantra we'll hear more of because the movement is looking for opportunistic events to claim victory."

Industry is mindful of the movement, she says, but responses have been limited because leaders are currently preoccupied with a raft of environmental regulations imposed by the Obama administration. "At some point, industry needs to respond in a more robust manner," she says, while Congress and the courts will also likely shape the Keep It in the Ground movement.

Indeed, a US Court of Appeals will be reviewing the late April decision by New York state regulators to deny water permits for a yet-to-be-built pipeline designed to transport Marcellus Shale gas from Pennsylvania to New York. Cabot Oil & Gas Chief Executive Dan Dinges says his company, a partial owner of the pipeline, endorses renewables in the energy mix, but that activists need to be realistic about timing, cost and scale, and not so dismissive of the lower-than-coal carbon footprint of natural gas.

Frank Verrastro, an energy specialist with the Center for Strategic & International Studies, says the movement has caught some in industry off guard. Still, he fears that "even the most responsible players in industry will be painted with the same brush." By focusing on climate issues alone, he emphasizes, demonstrators are glossing over the economics, security, practicality, financing and other difficulties involved with deep decarbonization.

That argument doesn't faze activists. Nor does a decision by the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management to migrate its oil and gas lease auctions to an online format. "I think it's a creative bunch," 350.org's Kowalski says of activists. "I wouldn't underestimate our ability to make a point."

**Elizabeth McGowan, Washington**

### **Compass Points**

- **SIGNIFICANCE:** Keep It in the Ground's momentum appears to have caught the oil industry off guard, while concerns about the potency of the greenhouse gas methane now mean even gas' role as a bridge fuel from coal to renewables is being challenged.
- **CONNECTION:** With the signing of the Paris accord, environmentalists want the US to be a global model, promoting wind and solar ([EC Apr.22'16](#)).
- **NEXT:** A Keep It in the Ground rally takes place in Washington on May 15. This movement will continue no matter who next occupies the White House ([EC Apr.1'16](#)).