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Canada

Activists in B.C gear up for 'the next Standing Rock' with tiny house protest

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An activist from the Neskonlith band of the Secwepemc people in British Columbia is preparing for what she believes is the next Standing Rock, with a unique project aiming to block the expansion of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline on Indigenous territory.

Kanahus Manuel is leading a growing group of activists and supporters from the Secwepemc tribes in B.C. opposed to the pipeline expansion who are constructing tiny houses to place in its path.

"We're standing in the way of the pipelines," said Manuel. "We're occupying and claiming back our traditions and establishing our traditional villages."

The building of the first tiny house began earlier this week near Kamloops, B.C. Manuel, the daughter of the late political leader and activist Arthur Manuel, is spearheading the "Tiny House Warriors" project.

Work has begun on the Tiny House Warriors project, a protest against the expansion of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline. Activists expect to build 10 homes which will lie on the route of the Kinder Morgan pipeline. (Greenpeace)

Ten tiny houses will be built and placed strategically along the 518-kilometre stretch of the Trans Mountain pipeline route that runs through Secwepemc territory, to assert Secwepemc law and jurisdiction and block access to this pipeline, Manuel said.

She was a constant at the Standing Rock protests in North Dakota, which saw hundreds of activists and self-described water protectors from around the globe come together to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline expansion, arguing it threatened the Missouri River.

She views the protest against the Kinder Morgan pipeline as another Standing Rock starting to unfold.

"It's going to take everyone to protect our lands and waters. We have the whole world watching because of Standing Rock," Manuel said.

"Many people from Standing Rock want to come and help fight this â€” we have a lot of support. And we have a new generation that wants change. It's coming from the youth and the young people. It's their future."

Consent never given for pipeline: Manuel

Secwepemc territory covers a vast area of unceded land in which the pipeline would threaten Indigenous lands, wildlife and waterways, she said, and consent was never given for the Kinder Morgan expansion.

"We, the Secwepemc, have never ceded, surrendered, or given up our sovereign title and rights over the land, waters and resources within Secwepemcul'ecw [traditional Secwepemc territory] ," Manuel said.

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"We collectively hold title and governance regarding Secwepemcul'ecw and the collective consent of the Secwepemc is required for any access to our lands, waters and resources."

CBC has contacted Kinder Morgan to request comment.

Trans Mountain announced Wednesday it has finalized agreements with six contractors to build portions of the pipeline expansion, which will carry crude oil from a terminal near Edmonton to Burnaby, B.C. Construction is set to begin later this month.

At a community gathering in Secwepemc territory in June, a declaration was signed to move forward with tiny house building project as the best action to take against the pipeline expansion.

The houses will be outfitted with solar power and efforts will be made to use recycled materials, to minimize environmental impacts.

The houses will be moved and placed strategically along the route of pipeline construction.

"People will be living there. We plan to utilize the spaces for language camps, traditional tattooing," said Manuel.

The Secwepemc Nation is made up of 17 bands. Manuel said three of the bands have signed some sort of agreement with Kinder Morgan, but it's hard to find out exactly which bands those are because the deals were not made public.

But Neskonlith Chief Judy Wilson supports the tiny house blockade.

"Neskonlith opposes the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain tar sands pipeline because of the damage we know it would bring," said Wilson.

"Issues of bitumen being piped across waterways should be everyone's concerns. We've seen with Mount Polley [the site of a 2014 tailings pond breach] that our governments aren't ready to deal with a spill and the effects are left for us to deal with for years or decades. We won't let that happen again."

Manuel estimates that each tiny home will cost under \$5,000 and expects all 10 to be finished before the end of September. Greenpeace Canada is sponsoring the first one.

"The Secwepemc Tiny House Warriors are creating community and building homes for their people," said Mike Hudema, a climate and energy campaigner at Greenpeace Canada.

"This is why we stand with them â€” the rightful defenders of their lands and waters â€” in this peaceful and courageous act of defiance. Every step of the way, we will continue to oppose Kinder Morgan and the financial institutions bankrolling this climate-killing, Indigenous rights-bulldozing pipeline."

Ultimately, Manuel said the tiny house protest is a peaceful act of resistance. Its goal is building something "beautiful that models hope, possibility and solutions to the world," she said.

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"We invite anyone and everyone to join us."

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