

Native protesters block Trans-Canada Highway, vow further action

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REGINA - First Nations protesters blocked the Trans-Canada Highway east of Regina for about 30 minutes Sunday as part of province-wide - and quite possibly Canada-wide - protests.

In what they are terming "days of action," numerous bands and tribal councils across Saskatchewan are taking part in or are in support of the protests, asking for a renewed relationship with the Crown in dealing with land issues. At the heart of this issue in Saskatchewan is the ongoing battle between First Nations groups and Enbridge Pipelines Inc.

"The boiling point, or the tipping of the scales, was some of the frustration that Chief Sheldon Wuttunee and the Red Pheasant First Nation had with their agreement with Enbridge Pipelines," said native spokesman Edmund Bellegarde.

"The pipeline is being expanded throughout this territory, throughout our territories and we feel that we're banding together with the Treaty Six First Nations and northwest Saskatchewan and we're taking the days of action here, so we are fully intending to be peaceful. We need to bring attention to our rights and our concerns that our elders have talked to us about and counselled us on our role as stewards of the land."

Earlier this month, Wuttunee warned actions were being considered to halt construction of a multimillion-dollar pipeline until they feel their concerns have been addressed. Wuttunee's concerns had centred on employment, with the chief alleging Enbridge reneged on a written pledge to provide jobs and contracts to First Nations people.

Meanwhile, Standing Buffalo First Nation - one of four bands without a treaty with the Crown - hit a roadblock this summer when the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal refused to quash a decision allowing Enbridge to expand a pipeline into the Weyburn area. The band had argued the pipeline traversed traditional Dakota-Lakota land and that the band had not been consulted.

Sunday's days of action were centred on the Waschuk Pipeline construction compound, located just west of White City. At about 3:30 p.m., the protesters, led by about 15 members on horseback bearing two Treaty Four flags, began the windy trek east down Highway 1. RCMP was on hand to help deal with the traffic problems that resulted.

Some disgruntled motorists responded to the blockage by cursing or waving middle fingers as they used a gravel road next to the highway to make their way around. Traffic was relatively back to normal within 20 to 30 minutes, as protesters set about erecting a teepee at the T-intersection leading into the Waschuk Pipeline site. Other than a man working security at the entrance, no one from Waschuk Pipeline was on site Sunday.

Officials from Waschuk Pipeline could not be reached for comment on Sunday.

However, Enbridge spokesman Glenn Herchak said corporation officials are "disappointed that we've gotten to this point."

"We've offered to sit down in talks with both the First Nations - Red Pheasant and Carry the Kettle - on their concerns and we're ready to meet with them as soon as they're ready to meet with us," he said.

However, Bellegarde said the protest may continue for some time.

"We're going to be 24/7 occupation here and we will remain as such until we believe we have some commitments," Bellegarde said. "We will take as long as is necessary to get the proper parties to the table, being the federal and provincial governments and the industry players. We're hoping to keep the lines of communication open with all of the government agencies and law enforcement officials. We want to make sure that we're peaceful, peaceful in our actions and our activities and we want to insure that is kept throughout the whole process here."

Not only is Saskatchewan to be affected, but Bellegarde said treaty territories in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario will also be taking part in the action.

Regina Leader-Post with files from Canwest News Service