

We Are All Stewards of the Land: One community's fight against fracking

by Scott Harris

It's been more than six months since a small group of activists stood on a dusty road on the Kainai Blood Reserve in southern Alberta, putting their bodies in front of a line of trucks that had come to begin fracking operations on their land.

The group, made up of members of the Kainai Lethbridge Earth Watch and their supporters, including members of the Lethbridge chapter of the Council of Canadians, had been fighting for almost a year against an agreement that would see half of the tribe's lands opened to fracking. The \$50-million deal between the tribe-owned Kainaiwa Resources Inc., Calgary-based mining company Bowood Energy, and U.S.-based Murphy Oil granted a five-year lease for roughly 129,280 acres for oil and gas drilling. The deal, say opponents, was made without the free, prior and informed consent of the Kainai members, in violation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Three women, Elle-Maija Tailfeathers, Jill Crop Eared Wolf and Lois Frank, refused to end the blockade without a commitment that fracking operations would not begin. They were arrested on September 9, 2011, and charged with "intimidation" under the Criminal Code. Their case, which is still before the courts, has received international attention.

Canadian Perspectives spoke with Elle-Maija Tailfeathers about why she felt she needed to take action.

What motivated you to stand in front of a line of trucks?

After nearly a year of trying every other means, fracking still went ahead on the Blood Reserve. Government did not listen, Chief and Council did not listen, Murphy Oil and Bowood Energy did not listen, and the ERCB [Energy Resources Conservation Board] did not listen. The

choice to stand in front of the trucks and demand to be heard was not really a choice at all. Along with the others who were there that day, I felt that I had a moral obligation and responsibility to the land. Our people have been stewards of that land since time immemorial. Our language, our culture, our way of life, and our very existence come from that land. Without it, who are we?

What are your concerns about fracking operations on the Blood Reserve?

My deepest concern is for the land itself. We all know that fracking has irreversible and detrimental impacts on the land and water, and I believe that we need healthy land in order to have healthy people. We are already beginning to see the negative impacts that fracking has on human health on the Blood Reserve, and it is only the beginning.

What role do you see for groups like the Council of Canadians in this fight?

The support of non-First Nations people, such as the Council of Canadians, has been critical in our fight. Without their support, I fear that our efforts would be in vain.

Fracking pollutes groundwater and groundwater feeds into everything, meaning that fracking on our land will not only affect our people, but also all of the surrounding communities. It's not just an Aboriginal rights issue, but rather an issue that anyone living on or near the Oldman Watershed should be concerned about.



Lois Frank blocks a truck from entering the Kainai Blood Reserve in southern Alberta. Members of the Kainai Lethbridge Earth Watch and their supporters, including members of the Lethbridge chapter of the Council of Canadians, physically blocked trucks that had come to start fracking operations there.

I truly believe that we are entering an age of global awakening as we begin to realize that our dependency on gas and oil is completely unsustainable. Our story on the Blood Reserve is just a microcosm within the bigger picture of global action towards a sustainable future for our planet.

What is happening now on the Blood Reserve with regard to fracking, and where do you see your campaign going from here?

There are a number of wells actively being fracked. Since the fracking began this last fall, there have been two documented earthquakes on the reserve. In early December, a number of students fell ill after being exposed to sour gas fumes while at the middle school. It is incredibly alarming to know that our youth cannot even attend school without the potential threat of exposure to natural gas.

My hope is that our people continue to speak out and affirm our collective responsibility to the land itself. I also hope that the global movement against fracking has an impact on our community's struggle.

For more information on the Kainai Lethbridge Earth Watch and how you can support their efforts, visit www.klew.org.

Scott Harris is the Prairies Regional Organizer for the Council of Canadians.