

Green spider heroes take on oilsands giants

Stunts, facts marshalled to sway Alberta opinion

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EDMONTON - A small army of environmentalists are convinced they can sway public opinion to scale back Alberta's lucrative oilsands projects.

Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, which share office space on Calgary Trail, are up against an oil industry that has pumped billions of dollar into the province.

Both groups have decades of lobbying -- some successful, others not -- and Albertans are largely behind environmental reforms.

But the debate over the potential effectiveness of a Greenpeace campaign to "Stop The Tarsands" in a province dependent on oil revenue is shaping up to be a discussion that's dividing policy-makers and environmentalists.

Albertans "are clearly telling us that we need to do a better job, in terms of the environmental perspective. They own the resource," says Brian Maynard, vice-president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

"Greenpeace and others like them; it's fair to say there's room for all voices." Senior government members are less convinced.

Finance Minister Iris Evans dismisses Greenpeace as a short-term publicity generator that will have no long-term impact.

"I don't think this is an approach that gains anything," Evans says.

In Alberta, activists have dressed up in superhero costumes, disrupted news conferences and rappelled from the High Level Bridge and the ceiling of the Shaw Conference Centre.

It's all part of an environmental movement that became increasingly confrontational after Greenpeace opened its Edmonton office nine months ago.



CREDIT: John Lucas, the Journal
 Sierra Club members Lindsay Telfer, Jessica Warren and Jeh Custer

Led by University of Alberta law graduate Mike Hudema, they stress their tactics are "non-violent direct action." Banner-waving protesters, for instance, followed Premier Ed Stelmach at virtually every campaign stop during the spring election, megaphones in hand.

Those tactics were approved by Yossi Cadan, Greenpeace Canada's national campaign director. He spent 15 years in Israel as an environmental activist.

"We're not expecting that the situation in Alberta will change tomorrow. We're realistic. But we strongly believe this is the wrong way to go and we need to do as much as we can to change that," he says.

With an annual budget of \$300,000, the plan is to stage publicity stunts that educate the public on oilsands projects.

At a later date, they promise to roll out suggestions for alternative energy sources. An informed public will sustain pressure on the government to change, Cadan says.

"I think the message that they're trying to get across is important, but my concern is that the more they do that we stop talking about the message and start talking about the gimmick of the day," says Tory MLA Thomas Lukaszuk, who saw uninvited Greenpeace activists heckle his supporters outside his campaign office during the spring election.

"People ended up talking about the event they created, but very little discussion took place about the environment. So, they're almost stealing their own story, stealing their own show." So why do these environmentalists persist with such elaborate protests? Activist Jessie Schwarz, 21, says their actions spark a dialogue on environmental causes that didn't exist prior to the protest, which is healthy in a democracy.

"It at least brings up that issue, even if people are going to dismiss you as radicals," she says. "If we've only changed a couple of people's minds in the process, we've done our job." Not all environmental groups are so bold. The Sierra Club's focus remains on developing grassroots movements that are far less confrontational, says Leila Darwish, associate director of the group's prairie chapter.

"We're not ninjas, so we won't be coming down from the rafters," she says in reference to several high-flying stunts staged by their building neighbours.

The two groups share office space primarily to save on administrative costs, she says, but some activists volunteer on both sides of the building's hallway.

"It's a personal choice," Darwish says.

Other groups, like the Pembina Institute and the World Wildlife Foundation, advocate environmental causes primarily through research and reports. And then there are countless individuals who campaign through writing letters to government, forming petitions and becoming spokespersons for specific issues.

Computer technician Steve Andersen, 27, joined Greenpeace over other groups

because he felt it was the most effective. "It basically comes down to frustration. You have to do something." Many Albertans, however, have a tendency to shy away from negative campaigning, even though the core message resonates with them and polling suggests they want an industry slowdown.

David Taras, a political expert at the University of Calgary, says protests that embarrass the premier have proved disastrous in the past. "These things can easily backfire, especially in a Conservative province if things are too out there ... or if they're seen as irresponsible or not respectful," he says.

Others believe Greenpeace will have little chance of success here unless it targets Americans and other provinces as part of the campaign.

"These other audiences don't rely on Alberta's oil for jobs and economic development," says Kathryn Harrison, an analyst on environmental movements at the University of British Columbia. "The question is, what sort of leverage could they get on environmental standards if they placed pressure elsewhere?" Greenpeace Alberta leader Mike Hudema, who wrote a book about activism, disagrees, saying a variety of tactics are best suited for the province.

The national Greenpeace office ultimately decided that its form of protesting would work because the group would grab more headlines in a province not used to seeing such radicalism.

Hudema won't reveal what action is planned, but says Greenpeace's heavy lobbying will continue with the support of nearly 5,000 Alberta members.

"We'd love to have a rational conversation with the government, but they're unwilling to do that, so you see the escalating of groups like Greenpeace," he says.

But MLAs say the most effective way of getting their attention is to pick up the phone. Lukaszuk says no one from Greenpeace has ever asked to meet with him and he suspects no other Tories have received a phone call either.

"The environment is important. No one is disputing that," he says. "But there are more effective ways of getting your points across. That's their choice."

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FACTS & FIGURES

Greenpeace

w 1971: Founded in Vancouver to oppose nuclear testing in Alaska

w 2007: Edmonton office opened to oppose Alberta oilsands

w 5,000: Alberta members

w Alberta leader: Mike Hudema, 29

w Method: Non-violent confrontational protests

w Campaign finances (Alberta): \$300,000 annual budget

w Group history: Sailed ship into South Pacific nuclear testing zone in 1970s; years later, New Zealand declares itself nuclear-free.

w Led major push for chlorine-free paper products in Germany

Sierra Club

w 1892: Group founded in San Francisco to lobby for more national parks

- 1995: Prairie chapter launched

- 1998: Edmonton office opened

- 500: Alberta members

- Alberta leader: Lindsay Telfer, 30

- Method: Develop grassroots networks of environmentalists to influence policy

- Campaign Finances (Prairies): \$160,000 annual budget

- Group history: Opposed building dams in the 1960s, led fight to stop Grand Canyon dam construction.

- Kearl oilsands project in Alberta put on hold following Sierra Club court action.

- Edmonton campaign includes support for anti-idling bylaw.

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