

## Bringing the fight for water close to home

By **Cody Hooks**, [chooks@taosnews.com](mailto:chooks@taosnews.com)

*The Taos News*, 1/19/2017

Two months after a standoff at a bridge in North Dakota resulted in 300 people being injured in sub-freezing temperatures at the hands of law enforcement, echoes of that scene reverberated again in Taos.

On Jan. 16, water protectors held prayer demonstrations at three places near the resistance camps that have become landmarks in the ongoing standoff — Turtle Island, the drill pad and Backwater Bridge on North Dakota Highway 1806. According to observers and indigenous media, less-than-lethal weapons were used on water protectors.

For Christopher Lujan, who is from Taos Pueblo and was on the front line in November when the first confrontation at the Backwater Bridge occurred, the events on Martin Luther King Jr. Day were yet another call for sustained action — not just in North Dakota, but in Taos, too.

Even as the main camps transition because of the coming spring floods, leaders in North Dakota and New Mexico are calling on water protectors and allies in the Standing Rock struggle to bring the fight closer to home.

Now Lujan, his family and friends are figuring out what it means to move the movement forward in Northern New Mexico.

### **War zone**

Water protectors at the resistance camps continually call for a spirit of prayer and nonviolence to center the movement to stop the final phase of construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Yet the camps do not exist in isolation; a hodgepodge of militarized police from a variety of agencies — local, state and federal — have been a constant presence on the other side of the front line.

The earliest flare-up of violence against water protectors happened in September, when guard dogs under the purview of a private security firm attacked a number of demonstrators. That was followed by the Nov. 21 Backwater Bridge incident, a Sunday night, when folks at the Oceti Sakowin camp attempted to remove a barricade of burned out trucks from the bridge.

“That night when things happened, it got very intense. We were all in prayer, singing and chanting. The [Morton County, North Dakota] sheriff’s department and security [forces] got really violent. They started tear gassing us and spraying us with the mace and water cannon,” Lujan said.

But it isn’t one-off incidents that have prompted many people — including Lujan and other Taosenos — to call the situation a “war zone.”

Indeed, there’s been steady surveillance of the camps from the get-go.

Police occupy Turtle Island with a barbed-wire barricade and flood lights that run throughout the night. Helicopter flyovers are nearly constant. Drones (used by indigenous-led media) have been shot down. Live feeds on Facebook and from drone cameras are often interrupted. Unexplained and widespread malfunctions in water protector technology aren't uncommon.

And in the past week, a type of missile launcher was placed near the front line.

### **Social media**

While prayer and construction have sustained the camps internally, it is largely the democratic use of technology and social media that has sustained the movement outside Standing Rock.

Avi Ferber, a Taos resident who has spent time in the front line camps, told *The Taos News* in December that the movement against the DAPL has spawned a legion of "citizen journalists."

"If it wasn't for Facebook, how would people have known? I feel like that was a really important element of what was happening up there," Ferber said.

Lujan agrees.

"The mass media has shut out [this story]. They aren't there. The only source we had was the Facebook social media and live feeds. That's how word got out. After a while, we didn't really need the mass media anymore," Lujan said.

That's how he and his daughter, Emileah Lujan, heard about the events from Monday (Jan. 16) at the bridge, island and drill pad. That's also how they organized a small, but noticeable action Tuesday (Jan. 17) afternoon.

"It was a spur-of-the-moment thing," he said. "We had to make an action out here to show that we're not sitting idle. We're making it known we're out here and watching," he said.

### **Local and long term**

Social media will surely prove to be a key element in kindling the momentum of the Standing Rock struggle and putting it into use locally.

Lujan — along with Sheryl Romero and a few other folks from Taos Pueblo — created "Pueblo Water Protectors" in late 2016 in answer to a call from the resistance camps for global action against the DAPL and other pipelines.

"Standing Rock is opening up so much," Romero said, noting that fighting racism is at the heart of this movement as much as fighting extractive industries.

Pueblo Water Protectors isn't about collecting money and sending donations to the front line. "We're about action," he said. That's why, when he heard word of more standoffs at the bridge in North Dakota, they took to the streets with signs and song.

But the group doesn't want to focus on DAPL alone. Instead, it wants to make sure water here in Taos and Northern New Mexico is protected.

"They are still drilling [for the pipeline], the camp is [transitioning] and we're worried about Trump and what he's going to do from here on out. But where do we stand? Where do we go?" he said.

Wherever the group and the movement go, it starts with educating themselves, he said.

Emileah Lujan said that when it comes to water in Taos County, there's a number of issues at play, from the Questa Chevron Mine to the natural gas pipeline in the R'ò Grande Gorge. The group is still figuring out when to have more meetings, informational discussions, actions and demonstrations. They're still figuring out how to plug into the indigenous-led movement around the state.

But those are just the sorts of questions that will sustain what Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, director of the Western Environmental Law Center, calls a "groundswell of opposition to new [oil and gas] development in [New Mexico]."

"People here in New Mexico are inspired, especially [with the] new [Trump] administration. I can see that growing every single day," he said.

But the movement isn't altogether new. "It's a very complex situation in the San Juan Basin.

"There are tens of thousands of oil and gas wells, along with proposed wells, in conjunction with new pipelines. That being said, the community [around Chaco] is very organized and have robust campaigns. That's been going on for years," he said.

Indeed, the law center has worked on oil and gas issues around Chaco for nearly a decade, he said, all the while coordinating with local, Diné-led organizations.

While keeping tabs of the many Standing Rock-like issues in New Mexico can be overwhelming, that's what the law center and those indigenous-led organizations are all about.

Calls to action, such as the one that brought together 100 organizations and nearly 150 people Tuesday in Santa Fe to protest the lease of nearly 1,000 acres for oil and gas development around Chaco, pull people together.

"If [issues] do come up in our neighborhood, we'll be there to stop it," he said.



Christopher and Emileah Lujan, who are part of the Taos-based Pueblo Water Protectors, stand near the Missouri River and Turtle Island in North Dakota in late 2016.

Courtesy Emileah Lujan