The price of a pipeline—and who pays it

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The Sacred Stone Camp near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, is one of the places where those resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline have gathered. Some rights reserved by Tony Webster.

More than 200 tribes and First Nations from across North America have gathered to protect a site just off the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, where Energy Transfer LLC, a Texas-based energy company, plans to build an oil pipeline across the Missouri River. As indigenous people have documented, the pipeline route crosses sacred sites and has the potential to contaminate the reservation's water supply.

Responding to months of opposition to the pipeline, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wisely decided in mid-September to halt pipeline construction temporarily in order to consider the Standing Rock Sioux's concerns.

Meanwhile construction continued at nearby sites on the 1,172-mile pipeline designed to carry oil from North Dakota's Bakken oil fields through South Dakota and Iowa to Illinois. Protests continued, too, with support from the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ.

Those resisting the pipeline have demonstrated a unity among indigenous people that has not been seen in more than a century. The insistence of the Standing Rock Sioux on respect for their holy ground and their rights as human beings serves as a significant witness. Their action has, from the beginning, been grounded in prayer. The camps where people have gathered have hosted nearly continuous religious

ceremonies.

Indigenous peoples' willingness to make personal sacrifices and put their bodies in danger recalls the civil rights movement. This commitment was especially vivid in early September when private security guards for the pipeline company allowed attack dogs to bite unarmed people as bulldozers rolled in to dig up the ground the tribe was protecting.

The Standing Rock Sioux are raising questions that all of us must face: What compromises are we willing to make in our search for more and more fossil fuels? Who will suffer most when the all-but-inevitable accidents and spills take place? What are the processes that determine where pipelines are laid and who has a voice in those processes? The extraction of fossil fuels comes at a price, and who pays has always been a matter of political will and power.

In rightly protecting the land and water around them, the Standing Rock Sioux people and those who have joined their resistance give us all occasion to ponder what we mean when we say, with the psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1).

A version of this article appears in the October 12 print edition under the title "Whose land, whose oil?"