



PROJECT MUSE®

Communities along the Line: Interview with Emily Ferguson

Stephanie Lemenager

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 76-86 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/597851>

Communities along the Line: Interview with Emily Ferguson

STEPHANIE LEMENAGER

Emily Ferguson became a significant figure in North American energy politics when she created an accurate map of an Enbridge pipeline while she was still an undergraduate student and made the line, and her knowledge of it, available through social media. Ferguson's pipeline maps can be found on her blog, *Line9Communities*. The blog serves as a meeting place for property owners and concerned citizens living in the shadow of oil infrastructure in the era of the Alberta oil sands and North Dakota's Bakken fields. Ferguson currently works with First Nations on pipeline projects, including TransCanada East. Her blog continues to galvanize the grassroots movement that she names "communities along the line."

Emily Ferguson spoke with Stephanie LeMenager in the summer of 2014.

Stephanie LeMenager (SL): Emily, I love your blog. I was just looking through it again in preparation for talking with you, and I'm just amazed by it. I wonder if I could ask you some questions about how the blog originated.

Emily Ferguson (EF): I guess it all started somewhat by chance. I originally had wanted to go to one of the Keystone XL protests that was in Washington, DC, back in 2011. And just before that, I went to a climate change conference in Ottawa, where people had started talking about this Line 9 pipeline. I had no idea of where it was. So I went to a couple

of Enbridge's community and conservation area meetings where they gave presentations on the proposed project.

At the first meeting that I went to, they had some extra brochures at the end. So I approached an Enbridge representative who was a bit hesitant but gave me a brochure. I soon realized that the information in the brochure was only for a very limited, local area, but not of the entire pipeline. I've lived at several locations along the pipeline during my life and was never aware it was in my backyard. I was very curious to learn more.

So I went to another conservation area meeting, and at that one, again, the same representatives from Enbridge were there. I approached them again afterwards and requested an info package. A very quick response came from a member of the Enbridge team, "Who do you work for?" At the time, I was just a student, in my last year at university. I'm kind of an introvert, and here I am sticking myself out there and asking them for this information. I'm sure they could hear the quiver in my voice, and I was basically shaking. It was all done in a very timid type of way. But then their response back was so aggressive. It caught me off guard.

There happened to be a professor from McMaster University, where I was attending school, who overheard my conversation with the Enbridge reps. I didn't personally know her. But she clearly overheard my conversation and just kind of stepped up and said, "Actually, I would love some information as well." She could tell that I was being bullied around a little bit. And they said the same thing to her, not necessarily asking whom was she working for, but they said, "This is private information, and we can't give it away for security reasons." Then they proceeded to ask us for our driver's licenses, saying that they would mail us a copy. I thought, well you're holding this information in your hands right now. And if you're okay to mail me a copy . . .

Anyway, the professor made a little bit of a scene just by saying, "This is a little disconcerting. I may have to write a letter to the editor; this is a public meeting." And then both she and I ended up walking away and saying, thanks but no thanks. We shouldn't have to provide driver's licenses to get access to public information. We had a conversation in the hallway, after the people from Enbridge left, where I learned she taught at Mac [McMaster]. We were connected on all the issues there and vowed to keep in touch and work together on the issue.

From that meeting, I went home and thought, well, they wouldn't give me information about the pipeline location, but there has to be an-

other way to figure it out. I was being presented with a challenge, and there's nothing I love more than overcoming them! I decided I was going to map the entire pipeline and soon realized this could be accomplished through Google Maps. I brought up a satellite image of a known pipeline point and then used Google street view to verify other points. At every road crossing, Enbridge is supposed to have a clearly marked oil pipeline sign. I looked at satellite view to identify cutouts in forested areas or slight discoloration in fields. These were clues to where the pipeline right-of-way (ROW) was. I then verified the ROW at the nearest road crossing by using street view and finding the Enbridge marker. I added a point at every verified road crossing and then simply connected the dots. It was kind of addicting when I got on a roll. Countless hours—weeks even—before the whole route was complete. Hundreds of points connected by a line and then fine-tuning of the vertices on the line to get the pipeline right.

I've really enjoyed sharing the site, including several high school presentations. I always tell the kids that I had supremely “nerded out” making the maps. Sometimes at four or five o'clock in the morning, I'd be sitting there thinking I'll just get one more point on the map. I'll just extend it a little further. The end product was personally very gratifying, but I wanted to do more. There was no use in this info being hidden on my computer. It needed to be out in the public and help to inform people about what was being proposed. I took screenshots of five-mile segments in both satellite and road map view. That was the beginning of www.line9communities.com.

I had never before had a blog or a website. I was brand new to Twitter. And I just posted up all of the maps. The website is constantly changing; I'm adding things, updating, constantly fact-checking. But the maps are the main attraction. Probably 75 percent of my views are to the maps that I created.

SL: I noticed on the blog you say you've had about eleven thousand maps views, but it's probably much more at this point.

EF: Oh, it's much more now. I'm actually over forty thousand views in total. And when I put that eleven thousand number up, I think I was sitting at around fifteen thousand total.

SL: Wow.

EF: It has to be at least 75 percent, if not more, who view the maps. Everybody goes to the maps, to find out where the line is, how close it is to them.

SL: It's an incredibly radical act, in a way. Have there been others who have tried to do this kind of pipeline mapping, after the success of your efforts?

EF: I don't think so. I came across one map a couple of months ago, but it was detailed with all of the watersheds and everything. And it again was kind of a general line, whereas the maps that I have are more specific. I still have the Google Maps file. So I can go in and zoom or change it, and I haven't had even one situation where somebody has come to me and said, it's not accurate. By this point, I've also driven pretty well the entire pipeline. I'm from Kingston, Ontario, and was attending McMaster in Hamilton, Ontario, during the mapping process, so I'd occasionally exit the highway when driving home to verify points and see if there was any activity. Everything was always very accurate.

SL: Well, I hope that McMaster's geography department is proud of you, since you just got your degree in that department! Tell me about what has happened in the aftermath. Have you been harassed at all for creating these maps or for the blog?

EF: You'll always have critics. I consider it a sign that you're talking about something that matters. There was one Enbridge spokesperson in particular named Graham White. He made comments in a *Toronto Star* newspaper article I was interviewed for. He said that I had been aggressive and confrontational—something along those lines—when asking for the information at the second public meeting. Funny thing is, he wasn't even at that meeting. He had also said that I was a well-known "activist." As I read the article, I thought, well here I am sitting at my computer, a quiet geography student—I don't exactly consider myself a well-known activist. I don't even like that term.

I believe White's words were, "a well-known activist and a stringent opponent to the pipeline." I responded to his comments on the blog and said that if you look at *Webster's Dictionary*, they define *stringent* as being "by the rules." In the blog post, I said, well if I'm a *stringent* opponent—that I'm opposed to it and I expect Enbridge to follow all

the rules—well then that’s a perfect way to describe me. My friend Jeff Insko at the *Line 6B Citizens* blog stood up against White’s comments as well by writing a blog and demanding White offer me an apology. The attempt by Enbridge to discredit my work was laughable, really. We had fun with it. (For the *Line 6B Citizens*’ blog entries, from January 18 and 19, 2014, titled “How Low Can Enbridge Go?”—about the attack on Ferguson in the *Toronto Star*—see part 1 [<http://grangehallpress.com/Enbridgeblog/2014/01/18/how-low-can-enbridge-go/>] and part 2 [<http://grangehallpress.com/Enbridgeblog/2014/01/19/how-low-can-enbridge-go-part-2/>].)

SL: I’m curious about what it means to be an official intervener in Canada’s National Energy Board. I know that’s a role that you’ve held for the past year. What do you do as an intervener?

EF: On the website, you’ll see some of the stuff about my grandma, who I was really close to. Applying for intervener status basically came out of things that she had said. Other people had asked, “Why don’t you apply and go through the formal process to speak about the line through the NEB?” But I thought, I just don’t have the time, and I have no idea how to go about that. And I probably wouldn’t even get in, because there are new rules where in Canada you have to be accepted to have your voice heard. I just thought, I’ll probably not get in.

My grandma spent the last five days of her life in hospital. I was there 24-7. We had a lot of time to talk. She had been following my involvement in the Line 9 project and the development of *Line 9 Communities*. She was upset with the proposal and how Enbridge was treating people. She looked at me and said, “Well, what are you going to do about it?”

So it was just basically that kind of playfulness, and her determination, that inspired me. “Okay, you’ve come this far. Now what are you going to do about it?” So while she was in the hospital, I filled out the application to be an NEB intervener, by her bedside. She passed away at sunrise on Earth Day—April 22. She held my hand and slowly said my name over and over as she peacefully drifted off and took her last breath. It was a truly moving experience. Everything happens for a reason. It’s like she was sending me a message, and I carry that memory with me every day.

Exactly one month to the day after she passed away, I got an e-mail

that I had been accepted as an intervener. The same day that you're accepted, you start to get this flood of e-mails. You get a list of everybody else who has been accepted. It's just a massive CC list of any e-mail that gets sent between any of the parties. The parties typically consist of government, industry, interest groups, and a few individuals. Being an intervener allowed me as an individual to participate in a very complex discussion—I wasn't part of any organization or affiliated with anyone. It was just me, as a concerned citizen.

Having grown up in the very small, rural community of Glenburnie, Ontario, where the pipeline runs, I was seen to have "relevant knowledge and expertise" which allowed me to ask the company direct questions with NEB oversight. Basically, I could send this huge list of questions, and Enbridge had to respond to every single question. But then it turned out to be kind of a silly process, because Enbridge doesn't actually respond to all the questions. Something that came up in this proceeding is that they would tell people that they were on a fishing expedition. They would actually write "fishing expedition" into the answer. That was just a standard answer that meant, "The company believes this has nothing to do with the project, and you're just fishing for information. So, we're not answering your question."

It was a little frustrating at times but an incredible learning experience to see how the proceedings go on and the formality of asking the questions and the written evidence and getting an affidavit. It was all brand-new to me. And then I stood up and gave my final oral testimony to the National Energy Board in October of last year at the hearing in Toronto. That was definitely a huge experience as well.

sl: Did you come away feeling that the democratic process, to some extent, is still functioning in Canada?

EF: I definitely did. I was really frustrated at a couple of points through the whole process, at people throwing their arms up and saying "this isn't a democracy" and "there are too many rules" and "the application to be an intervener is ten pages long." There was this huge fuss made about how hard it was to fill out the application.

But out of those ten pages, the first page was just filling out your name and contact info. The last page was, please sign here that everything on this form you believe is true. Then within that, there were ten

boxes, where you only had to fill out at least one. They were basically ten topics that you could talk about. I understand that the rules of participation are different compared to what they used to be; but at the same time, it still is possible to participate.

I'm a prime example. I was able to stand in front of the National Energy Board and tell them exactly what I thought about the whole thing. There's a link on the website to my speech (<http://line9communities.com/speech/>). With the Canadian National Energy Board, you're not allowed to talk about upstream activities, downstream activities, or the development of oil sands, and that includes climate change. You can't discuss any of those topics, but I put in a little piece at the beginning of my speech that just said, on the record, it's unfortunate that we're not discussing this, this, and this, because they're all part of the bigger picture.

sl: I'm curious about what, if any, types of coalitions are being forged or are already active between people interested in energy policy more broadly and in global climate change, and then the landowners' groups, people concerned with how pipelines impact their property?

EF: Personally, I formed a lot of alliances with landowners and landowners' associations. There's the Ontario Pipeline Landowners Association. I've met with several landowners and learned about their experiences. I've actually been out to their homes to have lunch and just talk and let them talk to me about what they're going through. And beyond that, my connections to residents along Line 6B in Michigan, like Jeff Insko and his blog at <http://grangehallpress.com/Enbridgeblog>.

Then there's Dave Gallagher, who was all over the news for the pipeline going right through his backyard. We've spent numerous hours on the phone.

I find it's difficult sometimes with organized environmental groups to get them talking with people outside of their specific interests. I know some of them are doing really good work. But I get frustrated at how they tend to barely scratch the surface, and a lot of it tends to scare people and offers no solutions. Sometimes their argument is weakened because they don't actually talk with the people who are most directly impacted. I have nothing against environmental activism per se. I have friends who work for environmental groups, and I've made connections and have stayed in contact with many of them. However, I find my most

productive time is when I'm sitting with landowners or landowners' associations. And also with First Nations.

I'm now an energy and regulatory specialist at an environmental consulting firm called Shared Value Solutions (<http://www.sharedvaluesolutions.com>).

I actually got the job through Twitter! svS found me through the *Line 9 Communities* website and just said, "We see you're doing some awesome work here. Are you interested in an interview? Are you looking for work?" So now I'm working with First Nations on various pipeline projects, including the TransCanada Energy East, and the massive restructuring of infrastructure to accommodate the influx of US shale gas into Ontario.

sl: Could you speak to how First Nations, aboriginal, and treaty rights have been affected by pipeline implementation?

EF: It's definitely testing the waters with this duty to consult and accommodate in Canada. I'm working with a couple of First Nations who weren't even notified that applications had gone in for certain pipeline projects. They may not all be a million-barrel-a-day, massive, brand-new pipelines. But even something like an integrity dig, where the company analyzes some sort of crack or dent or corrosion, can impact a community. When the company excavates, First Nations always have archaeological interest. When most of these pipelines were installed, there was no requirement to do an archaeological assessment. If there are operations and maintenance activities that disturb new soil, there could be cultural heritage resources which are destroyed during that activity. And the First Nation has no reassurance of how the excavation will affect water quality or soil quality, because the pipeline companies don't tend to conduct soil or water tests and for the few times that they do, they don't provide test results. If there is contamination found, they are not required to notify the First Nation. So there's a lot of work to be done in moving the provincial and federal regulations forward and including First Nations as true stewards of the land.

sl: At the risk of sounding utopian, it's fascinating to me how the idea of "communities along the line," which is a phrase you use in the blog, seem to have the potential to bring together a lot of different interests.

How has your sense of the scale of political community been affected by your work on Line 9?

EF: There are certain communities that have really come together, and I find the website has been a place where sometimes if you scroll down and read the comments on the bottom, people are discussing things with each other in novel ways. I even had a linked conversation between somebody in Maine and somebody along Line 9 in Ontario, because they realized that the Montreal–Portland pipeline links to Line 9 in Montreal. It’s interesting, really incredible, to see this knowledge and these relationships forming in the bottom of the comments box. I personally know people whom I have met in the past year, communities all along the pipeline, that I can now connect and explain, somebody else is going through the same or somebody else has had work on their property, or these people also have a concern about the river in their community, and the blog has made it possible for these people to know and talk with each other.

As for the formal political system, municipalities have done practically nothing. Municipalities don’t want to talk about it. If they got involved at all with the NEB, it was just through a letter of comment, a step down from being an intervener. The formal political system has done nothing. It is the grassroots—people talking to people over kitchen tables, or virtual kitchen tables—that has been the most successful piece of all of this.

SL: I notice that you mention in the blog how in the spring of this year, the reversal of 9B and then the Line 9 expansion were approved. How have your objectives changed since those decisions went through?

EF: It just made them stronger and inspired me to continue doing what I’m doing. I’ve actually taken two days off of work right now, but my days off, I’m planning on updating this integrity-dig chart that I have, where I take all of the mile posts and what repair work Enbridge is doing and record it in this Excel spreadsheet and then post it up on the website. Because I have people sending me e-mails and saying, “Do you have an updated chart? We’ve got new digs, and we want to understand what’s going on.” So they’re actually using the website for that information.

There was one page that I posted up (I think it was titled “Reflections on Line 9”) the night before the decision came out, and it said,

this website is going to continue—work is going to continue (<http://line9communities.com/reflections-on-line-9/>).

I will continue to meet with people who want to talk or do presentations, because it's needed now more than ever. I've seen the stats on the website every single month and everything is growing. People are becoming more aware of the topic; and as they learn more, they crave even more information.

sl: One of the things that is so great about your website is that you go into a lot of detail about how so-called unconventional oil, from Bakken or the Alberta oil sands, changes the equation in terms of how these pipelines need to be built and how the crude itself is going to move. You're really building a public knowledge base. Do you think that social media is perhaps the most effective way to get this information out?

EF: It definitely is. Everything that I've done with this website has been on-line, short of the first time I did a flyer drop. I dropped about four hundred flyers in Glenburnie, where I grew up, just to kind of get the website out there as my starting point. And then beyond that first flyer drop, all the promo for the website, I've done on Twitter and a little bit on Facebook, but mainly Twitter, and then sending people links and having them share it on their websites. I also find it useful to comment on the bottom of on-line newspaper articles and link my comments back to the Line 9 site. So if there's a story about Bakken crude, then I'll write something on the bottom, a comment about the article, and then somehow tie in a piece of the website to get the information out that way.

I was actually in North Dakota, probably two months ago, to go down and see the Bakken formation, and I met with a tribe there to learn about what they're going through and how they're dealing with everything. And then I was also out in Alberta last week and did a flight over the oil sands. The conference was called As Long as the Rivers Flow. It was put on by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and OKT law firm. I met with Chief Allan Adam, Dr. David Schindler, Dr. John O'Connor, just some of the icons I've looked up to for years. I was tweeting about this stuff and then had more retweets and posts to the website. Being fairly new to social media and to using Twitter, it's incredible to me how quickly the information gets out there.

sl: If you could give advice to people who are landowners along pipelines or to students or activists interested in energy politics, about how to promote a knowledgeable community or “pipeline citizenry” in their region, what would you say?

ef: The number one thing is research, research, research. You’ve got to dig into one thousand-plus-page documents and understand what’s really going on, and educate yourself as an individual but then not hold the knowledge for yourself. Share it. Research like crazy. Make sure that you really have the documents to back up what you’re talking about, and then share them with as many people as you can. I find that when you start to become known as a source of knowledge, more people come to you and say, “Somebody said you know about this.” And then you can explain to them. They spread it. The knowledge grows.

I think it’s something when people realize that unfortunately in many communities, we no longer go to our neighbors’ because you need a cup of sugar. You hardly know anything about your neighbors except for occasionally walking past them. It’s this bowling-alone concept. So to have that common experience of we’re all connected through these pipelines, you get back to gathering around kitchen tables. And that kitchen table could be a physical kitchen table, or it could be a Twitter kitchen table. Just for sharing information and saying, “This is affecting you, and it’s affecting me. This is what I know. What do you know?” Those kinds of relationships and all of the connections, once they get started, they continue fairly naturally. But the main thing is to dig for as much information as you can to start that discussion.

As for more general advice, everybody really needs to open their eyes and realize that when we’re seeking out unconventional oil in the Alberta oil sands and North Dakota’s Bakken fields and we’re transporting product in pipelines that are aging and rushing through new pipeline proposals with minimal oversight, it’s all very unprecedented. You have to open your eyes and realize that we’re really getting desperate. On top of all of the health, safety, and environmental issues surrounding this unconventional oil by pipeline and by rail, where does climate change fit in? How much longer can we burn all of these fossil fuels? Do we care about the consequences of our short-term thinking? If we care, what are we going to do about it? Where does the conversation about tackling climate change come in? I guess that’ll be my next chapter.