



Saturday's Sabal Trail rally draws a few hundred protesters

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The protest drew people from throughout Florida and other states. Saturday's protest was the latest in many that have been occurring at construction sites throughout the region. People who had been to some of the others said Saturday's was the biggest.

By **Cindy Swirko**

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A chanting, singing, praying and sitting-in crowd of a few hundred Sabal Trail pipeline protesters occupied a dirt road at a point where the trail will cross the Suwannee River west of Live Oak Saturday, vowing to expand opposition to the pipeline into a broader movement for environmental protection.

The protest drew people from throughout Florida and other states. Among them was Will Griffin of Savannah, Georgia, an army veteran who served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A member of Veterans for Peace, Griffin was at the large protest site of an oil pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota, in October.

"This is a war on our planet. We are trying to get the American public, a large portion of whom are climate-change deniers, to realize that this fight against the planet is the No. 1 problem of our entire species," Griffin said. "We as an anti-war and peace organization are here to support the local people who are fighting this pipeline."

Sabal Trail is a 515-mile pipeline that will stretch through parts of Florida to Alabama. It is being built by Houston-based Spectra Energy, Duke Energy and FPL-parent company NextEra Energy.

The companies maintain the pipeline will not harm environmental features, including the rivers under which it will run, and will be safe.

The companies have gotten the necessary permits but a lawsuit challenging the approval has been filed by the Gulf Restoration Network, the Sierra Club and Flint Riverkeeper.

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The trail will be dug under the Suwannee River just west of Suwannee River State Park. Some marchers drove to the protest site where the pipeline crosses a dirt road while others came on trails through the park.

Also at the site, on both sides of the road, were command posts for law enforcement agencies - the Florida Highway on one side and the Suwannee County Sheriff's Office, EMS and other agencies on the other side.

The officers didn't interfere with the protesters. Instead, some were stationed by a fence at the road and chatted with a few protesters and took pictures. FHP had one end of the road blocked so local traffic was detoured.

Two groups of protesters were linked with their arms in tubes. They alternately sat or laid in the road with other protesters in the center praying, singing or meditating.

A rumor first circulated that they would storm the construction site to get arrested, but that never happened. It was then rumored that officers would force them out of the road, but that never happened.

The scent of burning sage was common. Dan Yahola, a Seminole from Sebring, said he came to help protect water.

"That connects us. It's the common issue that we all share," Yahola said. "The pipe and the rocks can be all over the place, but the water is what feeds us and nourishes us."

Most of the signs that were carried dealt with water. A few dealt with fracking - a method of extracting gas through the high-pressure injection of water and chemicals into the earth. Fracking is controversial because of its environmental hazards.

Most of the crowd chanted and sung for a few hours and then drifted away.

Some protesters said they planned to spend the night at the site.