

## The Private Intelligence Firm Keeping Tabs on Environmentalists

**When big oil companies want to monitor activists, they turn to Welund.**



Activist Cedar George-Parker addresses a crowd of protesters opposed to the Trans Mountain Pipeline in British Columbia in April. **Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press via AP**

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The flyer shows a mob of balaclava-clad activists dressed in black, lobbing bottles at an undefined target. They could be protesting anything, but for attendees at a petroleum industry conference in Houston earlier this year, it was pretty clear what the violent demonstrators were targeting: the fossil fuel industry.

The scary image of protesters was distributed by Welund North America, a private intelligence firm that promises to help oil and gas operators mitigate the threat posed by an increasingly sophisticated activist movement. On the back of the flyer an anonymous testimonial reads, “Since subscribing to Welund we’ve dramatically increased our ability to pre-empt and better manage activist engagements and minimize reputational damage.” Logos—presumably of Welund’s clients—listed on the flyer include a who’s who of Big Oil and Gas: Royal Dutch Shell, Kinder Morgan, Duke Energy, Dominion, and Chevron. Welund has even secured contracts with the Canadian government.

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In the past year, Welund has presented at several energy industry conferences and has also partnered with the Texas Independent Producers and Royalty Owners Association—or TIPRO—to promote its intelligence-gathering services. The company bills itself as a leader in “understanding the activist threat” and in the past has provided intelligence on social movements and activist groups, including Greenpeace, Occupy Wall Street, and animal rights advocates.

Welund and its top North American officials ignored repeated requests for interviews and did not respond to detailed written questions. But publicity materials and other documents reviewed by *Mother Jones* shed light on the company’s strategies.

Welund is part of a deeply controversial cottage industry of private intelligence firms that has flourished in recent years. According to one estimate, the global industry is now worth about \$20 billion, and the agencies—sometimes with just a handful of employees—are popping up everywhere from Israel to Africa to the United States. Recent revelations have shown that Black Cube, an Israeli firm, gathered intelligence on Obama administration officials in an effort to undermine the Iran nuclear deal. Christopher Steele, the co-founder of Orbis Business Intelligence, another private firm, was responsible for the famous Trump-Russia dossier.

Welund, a UK-based company founded by a former MI6 special agent in 2007, has traditionally kept a low profile. Even its name, which is derived from Norse mythology, is little known beyond a small subset of industry and government contractors. Welund, which established a North America office in 2016, seems to rely heavily on its ties to industry and law enforcement. The firm’s vice president of operations, Travis Moran, is a former US Justice Department special agent who previously worked as a senior counterterrorism investigator at Dominion Energy, one of the largest suppliers of electricity and natural gas in the United States.

The company depicts the environmental movement as one of the energy industry’s most dangerous adversaries—comparable to the challenges posed by international industrial espionage. “What we’re talking about here is an existential threat,” Moran told the audience of oil and gas executives in Houston.

The industry seems to agree. In November 2017, when Welund partnered with TIPRO to provide free access to its intelligence platform, the petroleum group’s president described activism as “one of the most disruptive and costly threats to the energy industry—in lost productivity, damage, legal and reputational risk.”

**Welund’s effort** to court the oil and gas industry comes at a time when battles over energy development have reached a fever pitch. Beginning in 2008 with the campaign to block approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline, which was designed to carry tar sands oil from Alberta to the Gulf Coast, activists have focused on fossil fuel infrastructure as a target of both legal action and political protest. The movement claimed a major victory in 2015 when President Barack Obama rejected the Keystone project. (That decision was promptly reversed by President Donald Trump during his first few days in office.)

“The anti-fossil fuel movement is the No. 1 challenge threatening our industry, especially when they have sympathizers in the White House, Ottawa, and elsewhere in public office,” wrote the editor of the *Pipeline and Gas Journal*, an industry trade publication, shortly before the 2016 election.

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Welund specializes in profiling these activist threats and maintains a “live archive” of original content that, it says, is used by dozens of international corporations, law enforcement agencies, and government bodies. Its subscriber-only intelligence platform appears to be largely composed of open source data—that is, news reports, online information, and strategic analysis—according to the firm’s contracts with the Canadian government. At industry gatherings, the company has emphasized the importance of continuously following social media to develop effective counter campaigns. The firm

promises to closely monitor activists, and one of its Canadian contracts referred to the use of open and “other sources.” Canadian officials declined to say what those “other sources” included.

At the Houston conference, Moran described activists as traveling “professionals” who have more experience than the companies they are protesting. “We keep track of them,” Moran said. “You’ll see them at the Marcellus. You’ll see them at Bayou Bridge. That’s what they do.” The Bayou Bridge Pipeline is a controversial project in Texas and Louisiana; the Marcellus shale formation is the epicenter of fracking in the eastern United States.

The firm has also presented alongside Gryphon Sensors, a subsidiary of defense contractor SRC, which is a pioneer in the field of commercial drones. Moran, whose Twitter handle is “dronin\_on,” is a strategic partner at Gryphon and an advisory board member of the Texas-based Energy Drone Coalition, which focuses on the use of drone technology by the energy industry. According to Gryphon, its mobile drone security system, which can track hundreds of targets simultaneously, is “perfect for...law enforcement and critical infrastructure protection.”

In recent years, anti-pipeline advocates have been targeted by law enforcement agencies and private security contractors employed by the industry. In late 2012, the FBI opened an investigation into anti-Keystone activists. More recently, according to the *Intercept*, private security contractors and FBI informants infiltrated the activist camp at the heart of the Native-American-led protest movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. None of those controversies involved Welund, which cautions energy firms against using covert or illegal methods to obtain intelligence, arguing that such tactics are likely to do more harm than good. In Houston, Moran referred to the PR mess Energy Transfer Partners found itself in after contracting with private security firms that used aggressive tactics in encounters with protesters campaigning against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Moran advised companies enlisting the services of private security contractors to “make sure you have a policy that they understand.”

**Industry now has** a staunch ally in the White House, but activists have continued to engage in high-profile civil disobedience campaigns and legal challenges designed to thwart or delay pipeline development, often at great cost to the oil and gas firms. Environmentalists have also made life difficult for energy companies in Canada—as well as for the government agencies those firms often work with. In 2016, protesters disrupted a National Energy Board hearing in Montreal, resulting in several arrests and forcing the regulatory body to cancel two days of hearings on TransCanada’s Energy East pipeline, which was slated to run from Alberta to refineries and shipping terminals in New Brunswick and Quebec. TransCanada eventually terminated the project.

And that’s exactly what Welund is seeking to prevent. The company appears to have worked on behalf of clients involved in some of the most controversial projects currently moving forward: Dominion’s Atlantic Coast Pipeline, designed to carry fracked gas from the Marcellus Shale in West Virginia to processing facilities in Virginia and North Carolina; and the Trans Mountain Pipeline, which would greatly expand the capacity for shipping tar sands oil from Western Canada.

Dominion, Moran’s former employer, is facing strong headwinds as it seeks to complete its pipeline. Activists have already set up an encampment in an old growth forest known as Miracle Ridge that is in the project’s pathway and is scheduled to be cleared this year. This follows weeks of tree sits—including one by a 61-year-old-woman that garnered national attention—protesting the nearby Mountain Valley Pipeline.

***“It’s threatening your operations, it’s threatening your finances, it’s threatening your reputation, and it’s threatening your viability.”***

Kinder Morgan, apparently also a Welund client, was facing similar opposition when it decided to abandon its Trans Mountain project. In March, the company’s CEO described the anti-pipeline movement as “much more intense” and “more organized” than ever before. Two months later, in an unprecedented move, the Canadian government agreed to intervene and purchase the pipeline for \$3.4 billion. The sale closed this summer, and construction has been underway on about 600 miles of pipeline connecting Alberta’s tar sands with export terminals near Vancouver.

Opposition to the project has persisted, including from British Columbia Premier John Horgan, whose government has joined a First Nations lawsuit challenging the decision to approve the pipeline. The conflict has sometimes been described as Canada’s Standing Rock.

“People can just expect resistance to this project to grow,” Greenpeace activist Mike Hudema told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. “Already we’ve seen over 200 people risking arrest and getting arrested to try and oppose this project, and those

numbers are going to continue to increase as it moves forward.” In late August, a Canadian court ruled that the NEB had not properly consulted with First Nations groups and temporarily halted the project.

Welund did not respond to questions about its apparent work for Dominion and Kinder Morgan and whether that work related to the Atlantic Coast or Trans Mountain pipelines. Dominion declined to comment for this story. Kinder Morgan said it does not comment on security-related issues.

Last year, as Canada’s National Energy Board was evaluating Kinder Morgan’s application to build the Trans Mountain Pipeline, the agency signed a contract with Welund to monitor social media activity and provide the government with weekly updates on activist threats, according to documents obtained through a public records request.

The contract, which came just months after protesters shut down the NEB hearings on the Energy East pipeline, focused on helping the agency manage threats to “personnel, critical assets, information and services” as it prepared for upcoming public events, many of them related to the Trans Mountain project. The contract included access to Welund’s intelligence platform, email advice and warnings from Welund researchers, the Welund weekly banking digest, something called the “Welund Weekly Activist Overview,” and up to 50 hours of “bespoke services,” which focused on information specific to the safety and security of the agency’s staff and activities, according to the NEB. (Welund had already been providing the NEB with some form of intelligence and analysis for some time.)

Within the Canadian government, Welund’s services were touted by Lee Williams, who at the time was the head of security at the NEB. In a June 2016 email, Williams introduced his counterpart at the National Research Council—a Canadian government body that oversees research and development and often works closely with the private sector—to a Welund representative. “We’ve been using their services for almost a year,” Williams wrote, “and find both their web content and bespoke services very beneficial.” A few months later, the NRC’s security branch entered into a \$28,250 contract with Welund. In one document related to the contract, an NRC employee highlighted the firm’s “domestic and international military and counter-terrorism experience” and targeted data collection “through open and other sources.”

Williams has since left the NEB, according to government records. In recent promotional materials, Welund has listed a person named Lee Williams as a company contact. A Welund employee confirmed that a Lee Williams currently serves as an executive with the company but didn’t know whether he is the same Williams who worked for the NEB. Company spokespeople did not respond to written questions about Williams. Welund’s Williams did not return repeated phone calls and text messages. The NEB said it does not comment on HR-related employee matters.

The National Research Council declined to be interviewed for this story but said that Welund had a one-year service contract with the agency to provide country-specific risk assessments and alerts. This information, according to an emailed statement from the NRC, was used to assess the safety of travel and to brief employees in advance of international trips.

In response to a public records request for specific Welund materials—including copies of the weekly activist overview—provided to the NEB as outlined in the contract, the agency said it had no additional records in its possession.

Karen Ryhorchuk, an NEB spokeswoman, said the agency sometimes conducts security assessments in advance of public events in order to safeguard personnel, assets, information, and services. Welund, she said, assisted the NEB in managing security threats and risks. “Information provided to the NEB by Welund was from [publicly] available, open source data from conventional media and social media outlets,” Ryhorchuk wrote in an email.

The NEB’s contract with Welund expired at the end of 2017 and has not been renewed. But early this year, the agency awarded a similar contract to Falling Apple Solutions, which was founded by Eppo van Weelderren, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel in the Canadian army. Falling Apple has the same Alberta address as Welund, and van Weelderren is listed as one of Welund’s directors. According to the NEB, the contract with Falling Apple, a self-described engineering and project management firm, was terminated after only three months. When I reached van Weelderren by phone and told him what I was writing about, he hung up.

Meanwhile, privacy advocates are growing increasingly alarmed about the Canadian government’s use of intelligence firms—especially after a recent request by the NEB for contractors who could evaluate security threats by monitoring social media on an even broader scale. In June, Ron Deibert, a political science professor at the University of Toronto and director of the Citizen Lab,

which studies the intersection of technology and human rights, wrote an open letter warning that the hoovering up of massive amounts of data in the name of protecting critical infrastructure could have a chilling effect on free speech. “The system proposed... is inherently oriented toward mass data collection and analysis, and will, by definition, have significant collateral impacts on the rights and interests of individuals who pose no security threat,” he wrote. The NEB ultimately withdrew the proposal.

For its part, Welund may disagree with the heavy-handed methods employed against the Dakota Access protesters, but it still holds a rather ominous view of environmental activism. “It’s threatening your operations, it’s threatening your finances, it’s threatening your reputation, and it’s threatening your viability,” Moran said in Houston

The Houston conference was mostly celebratory, with discussions of greatly expanding oil production and pipeline capacity. There were presentations refuting the science of global warming and information sessions with representatives of the US Environmental Protection Agency and Bureau of Land Management. David Blackmon, editor of *Shale Magazine*, gave a talk titled, “The Trump-Driven Sea Change in Federal Energy Policy.” Chris Wallace of Fox News delivered the keynote address.

But, when Moran took the stage, the tone was decidedly darker. Showing the audience an image of a masked tree-sitter protesting a pipeline project, he warned them about the financial impact of activism. “If you’re not aware of this, if you’re not aware of how effective they can be...if you’re not ahead of the game,” he said, “this can be your fate.”

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