

Texas Tribune
The Blast
By: Kiah Collier

AMID PROTESTS, HOUSE PASSES BILL CRIMINALIZING TRESPASS, DISRUPTION OF OIL WELL, PIPELINE SITES

Protesters were escorted out of the Texas House gallery today as the lower chamber passed a bill that would create a criminal offense for vandalizing or interfering with the operation of a “critical infrastructure facility,” including oil and gas wells and above-ground pipelines.

House Bill 3557 would make it a second-degree felony to intentionally damage or tamper with a critical infrastructure facility or interfere with its operation. The legislation also would make it a state-jail felony to enter a facility with the intent to damage it or interfere with its operation. And it would impose a \$1 million fine on corporations or associations found guilty of either offense.

The bill, which passed on a 90-51 party-line vote, now goes on to the Senate for consideration.

The House vote comes amid an oil and gas boom and pipeline building spree that has sparked high-profile protests in West Texas and the Hill Country. Bill supporters, including industry groups, say the bill would only punish those who trespass and cause damage and that harsher penalties are needed for such offenses. But bill opponents say it is overly broad.

"Criminal acts of protest are already punished with misdemeanor charges," said **Adrian Shelley**, director of Public Citizen, in a statement. "We call on the Texas Senate to reject this ill-conceived bill that overcriminalizes Texans' right to free speech and peaceful assembly."

— *Kiah Collier*