EPA holds public meeting on Michigan oil spill

A WSWS reporting team
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A panel of representatives from state and federal government agencies addressed a public hearing Monday evening at Marshall High School in Marshall, Michigan about the response to the Enbridge pipeline oil leak last week.

Hundreds of local residents turned out, clearly demonstrating the widespread concern, but the presentations were brief and largely perfunctory, and the meeting lasted only half an hour.

There was no way for members of the audience to make their concerns and complaints known to the speakers on stage or to their fellow residents. There were no microphones on the floor or any opportunity to ask questions. Instead, the audience was instructed to move to a room across the hall if they wanted to speak one-on-one with low-level representatives of the agencies involved.

This was a clear attempt to divert the anger of Marshall residents and to shield Enbridge Energy from any negative coverage in the media. There was a heavy police presence at entry and exit points to the event.

As the meeting began, EPA Region 5 Director Susan Hedman delivered a PowerPoint presentation showing pictures of the breached pipeline, initial boom installations, and the trucks used to take the oil away.

The pictures of Tallmadge Creek turned completely black were striking. “It’s basically running oil,” said Hedman, adding, “the oil-water mixture is mostly oil.” She noted that the upper reaches of the Kalamazoo River were “very heavily oiled.”

EPA Deputy Incident Commander Mark Durno said that 78,000 feet of boom had been put in place to prevent the oil from flowing down the river and to deflect it into 37 containment locations. He warned that the booms were “only as strong as what they’re trying to hold back,” and that heavy rains could swell water levels. He indicated that there were no plans to increase the number of booms, and said the goal was to “collect oil strategically” by deflecting it to collection points.

Durno also showed photographs of sheen that remained in areas of the river where the bulk of black oil had been removed. “We’re dealing with a lot of sheen,” he told the audience, “the shoreline is going to continue to sheen for a long period of time.”

Durno reported that 45,000 barrels, about 1.8 million gallons of water and oil mixture, had been collected from the river so far, including 15,000 barrels, or 550,000 gallons, just that day. He said that the numbers sounded impressive, but added, “We are not going to sugar coat it—that marshy area still looks bad.”

A representative from the US Fish and Wildlife Service spoke next. Much of his presentation consisted in thanking the audience and the people of Marshall. He discussed the difficulties in catching wildlife contaminated by oil. “It’s super hard to catch geese,” said the speaker, “the term ‘wild goose chase’ didn’t come out of nowhere.” He added that in many cases, chasing oiled birds can distress the animals and reduce their chances of survival.

Becky Humphries from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment said that the department was sending out crews to collect affected animals every day, and that water quality will be tested for the next several years. Humphries said that “so far we have not seen a large fish kill,” but a lot of dead frogs and insects had been spotted. Many species of fish rely on frogs and insects for food.

Jim Rutherford from the Calhoun County Public Health Department said that 61 homes nearest to the spill site had been visited and advised to evacuate. Department representatives spoke with residents of the homes or left information at their doorsteps if no one was home. So far, 27 households declined to evacuate and 12 evacuated voluntarily.

Rutherford said that additional volatile organics could be stirred up in affected areas as a result of cleanup efforts, leading to additional evacuation recommendations. He noted that “There are still spikes of benzene at boom collection areas and other clean-up areas.”

Of public health concerns, Rutherford said emergency

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rooms had seen 26 people experiencing symptoms directly or indirectly related to the spill. A hotline set up to receive "odor complaints" from citizens had received "well over 5,000 calls."

The final reports were given by representatives from the US Department of Transportation, which is responsible for regulation and inspection of pipelines throughout the country, and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which is responsible for the investigation into the causes of the spill.

According to the NTSB speaker, on Sunday, July 25, at 5:56 p.m., there was a planned shutdown of the pipeline for 10 hours. Two minutes later, at 5:58 p.m., a low suction letdown alarm went off. Controllers in Edmonton, Alberta, believed this was a normal condition, he said.

At 4:04 a.m., the flow of oil was switched back on in accordance with the scheduled line start-up. At 7:52 a.m., the pipeline was shut down again, though no shutdown was scheduled. The NTSB official did not say as much, but this indicates that the company was aware that something was abnormal. At 9:25 a.m., the 911 call center received the first call reporting an odd smell.

Enbridge had no representatives on stage. CEO Patrick Daniel was present at the event but made no remarks. However, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with D'arcy Levesque, an official spokesman for the energy company. Asked about the warning the company received from the Pipeline Hazardous Materials Safety Administration in January that the now-ruptured pipeline had not been properly monitored for corrosion, Levesque downplayed the danger. "The regulatory agencies have a number of levels of warnings," he said; this warning was "the lowest level."

Levesque reiterated the latest calculations of the amount of oil spilled, saying 19,500 barrels of oil had been released and that so far approximately 10,000 had been collected. "That's our number," he said, "Nobody's been able to provide evidence of different numbers." When a resident stepped forward to challenge the company's calculations, Levesque would only say "We're not at liberty to speculate."

The EPA's initial estimate for oil spilled was over a million gallons, but has since been lowered to match Enbridge's estimate. No explanation has been given for the change.

Jay Wesley of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment told the WSWS that dozens of oiled animals had been recovered. "The recovery is going to continue for another week or two," he said. "So those numbers are going to continue to go up." He expressed concern over the long-term effects of oil contamination for the fish in the affected areas. "As oil deteriorates, it can take oxygen out of the water."

World Socialist Web Site reporters also spoke with local residents in attendance at the public meeting.

Michelle Waters, whose home is very close to the spill site, said she had voluntarily evacuated her home and was now staying in a hotel with her family. "We just left," she said. "We have three children."

She said she had suffered from headaches and sore throats as a result of the spill. "They haven't done any air quality testing and they haven't sucked any oil out of our neighborhood."

Asked what she thought of the meeting, Waters said, "I didn't hear too much I didn't already know."

Greg, a resident of Calhoun County, said, "[The spill has] limited our ability to use the waterway, you can't fish, or tube. I'm curious how long it will affect me." When asked about the health effects he replied, "We only got some of the smell. I don't think it will affect my well water."

"The oil was leaking Saturday at noon, I could smell it with the wind blowing from the north." said Cameron York. "I live three quarters of a mile south of the spill. It's in my hunting ground."

York did not receive a recommendation to evacuate because he lives south of the spill. "I get well water, but they say it's safe because the well water goes south. My well is only 37 feet deep."

"I live 10 miles south of the spill," said a local resident who declined to give his name. "I'm an outdoors man and a farmer. I think this will affect my whole way of life. I don't trust what they say here. I'm surprised there aren't more protesters and cops.

"The government is in with the corporations. They don't monitor the equipment. They have another four months, then they're all out of business."

Mark Tierney said he lives two miles north of the break. "It made us pretty nauseated, especially on Saturday," he said. "I think Battle Creek got the worst of it. Where's the regulation been for this pipe? No one knew about the oil line, not even the fire department."

John Hodge, another resident who was unimpressed by the presentation, told WSWS reporters, "It sucked; they didn't give us any information we needed." Of the numbers reported by Enbridge and the EPA, he said, "No, I don't trust all that."

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