

ExxonMobil oil spill befouls Yellowstone River

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Tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil have poured into the Yellowstone River just south of Billings, Montana since a pipeline owned by ExxonMobil broke open July 1. Left in charge of cleanup operations, the company has concentrated on downplaying the spill's impact.

One hundred and forty residents near the river in Laurel, Montana were evacuated because of the toxic fumes and risk of explosion.

ExxonMobil has said it does not yet have a repair plan or an explanation for the rupture, which the company says released between 750 and 1,000 barrels (32,000 to 42,000 gallons) of oil.

The 69-mile-long line moves 40,000 barrels of oil per day from Wyoming and Alberta, Canada, and supplies ExxonMobil's Billings refinery and another refinery in Laurel. The pipeline, called the Silvertip line, is comprised of sections ranging from 20 to more than 60 years old.

The Yellowstone River is an ecologically rich and vulnerable area just north of Yellowstone National Park. The river is habitat for trout, otters, ospreys, and endangered species including bald eagles. It is also the longest river unbroken by a dam in the US and is widely depended upon for irrigation in the state.

Like much of the Mississippi and Missouri watershed into which the Yellowstone feeds, the river is currently swollen with rapid-moving floodwaters and thus capable of carrying the oil spill far into the river system. The flooding has prevented crews from operating by boat, delaying cleanup efforts. Over the weekend, the river at Billings stood at nearly one foot above flood stage.

ExxonMobil initially insisted that the oil was contained in a ten-mile stretch of the river near its Silvertip pipeline. The federal Environmental

Protection Agency echoed this estimate. The Department of Transportation (DOT), however, reported that as of Tuesday, oil had already been observed as far downstream as Terry, Montana, a town 240 miles away.

In a press conference Monday, company officials acknowledged that the impacted area could be larger, but insisted that no oil had been sighted further than 25 miles away. Company President Gary Pruessing claimed the oil is "in really small patches," and air quality tests had found no "measurable amounts that would cause problems from a health standpoint."

This claim was followed by a release of federal documents revealing that ExxonMobil took far longer than it claimed to seal off the pipeline after it cracked. The company reported that it had begun closing off the 12-inch diameter pipe within seven minutes of the rupture. Pruessing told government officials and Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer that the pipeline was fully closed off within 30 minutes. The DOT's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, however, found the pipe spewed oil freely for 56 minutes.

These discrepancies, reminiscent of the initial damage estimates of last year's BP oil spill, suggest that the extent of the spill may be far worse than what is currently claimed.

The wildlife, fisheries, and environment are likely to suffer long-term consequences. "It could take years to really understand the impact of the spill," ecologist and conservation biologist Charles Preston of the Draper Museum of Natural History said in an interview with CNN. Preston noted that, in addition to fish kills, the many waterfowl and birds of prey were particularly vulnerable because of their fish-dependent diets. Toxins may also kill off insects that are critical food sources

for fish.

Residents along the river have expressed distrust and anger toward ExxonMobil. “I feel like now the cleanup crew is here and there are cameras everywhere,” one resident told CNN, “but only in the public places. Landowners don’t have cleanup crews in their place. We haven’t had anyone call us and say, ‘Hey, Exxon is taking care of you.’” She said that Yellowstone County residents were told they were not allowed to record Gary Pruessing’s responses to their questions during a meeting with company management Sunday.

Local officials in the town of Laurel raised concerns in October 2010 about the structural integrity of the line where it crossed the Yellowstone River. In response, the company conducted a survey of the line in December and asserted that it was intact and securely laid five feet below the ground. Officials expressed concerns again in May after floodwaters swelled the river; in response, ExxonMobil asserted that the pipeline was 12 feet below the surface near the river crossing.

The energy giant, whose executives take in enormous sums, has been responsible for extensive pollution over the past several decades, most notably the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* tanker oil spill off the coast of Alaska, ruining Prince William Sound with up to 750,000 barrels of oil. In Montana, the company’s pipelines have leaked hundreds of thousands of gallons of petroleum into rivers and the ground over the years, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council. One pipeline running through the Flathead Indian Reservation has broken open 71 different times since the mid-1950s, including three major spills between 1986 and 1991. One rupture released 163,000 gallons of crude into a creek.

ExxonMobil is not unique in its environmental record. In addition to the BP oil disaster, last year witnessed two pipeline ruptures similar to the Silvertip spill in the US. In July 2010, an Enbridge-owned pipeline running through Michigan ruptured, dumping at least 800,000 gallons of oil into Talmadge Creek and the Kalamazoo River. In June 2010, a Chevron Oil pipeline in Salt Lake City, Utah broke open, pouring tens of thousands of gallons into a tributary of the Great Salt Lake.



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