Oil spills in Minnesota and Arkansas

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On Wednesday, March 27, a southbound train loaded with Canadian oil derailed in western Minnesota spilling 15,000 gallons of tar-sands crude oil. Two days later, an ExxonMobil pipeline ruptured beneath a suburban neighborhood near Mayflower, Arkansas, spilling a "few thousand" barrels of the same crude oil and forcing the evacuation of 22 homes.

These major spills are the first to occur since the boom in North American oil production has begun to outgrow the existing pipeline network. This has contributed to a huge rise in crude-by-rail transport during the last three years. US trains carried 233,800 carloads of crude oil in 2012, more than double the 65,800 carloads transported in 2011. As the number of carloads has increased, so have accidents. Of the 132 incidents occurring between 2002 and 2012, 112 occurred within the last three years.

The spills have occurred as the Obama administration considers the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline, which would carry this crude oil from Canada to Gulf Coast refineries. However, after the pipeline spill in Arkansas, the argument that the derailment in Minnesota shows an urgent need for such a pipeline is questionable. Critics of the Keystone XL pipeline point out that corrosion risks are greater in pipelines carrying lower-grade fuel.

Tar-sands oil is heavier than standard crude, which causes it to sink quicker and complicate clean-up efforts. As of Sunday in Arkansas, ExxonMobil had deployed 15 vacuum trucks and 33 storage tanks to clean up and temporarily store about 12,000 barrels of oil and water that had been recovered. Crews steam-cleaned oil from property while some fought to keep oil from reaching nearby Lake Conway through storage drains. Tar-sands oil is cut with cancer-causing chemicals such as benzene to thin it out so that it flows easier through the pipes.

Meanwhile, ExxonMobil just missed setting a company and world record for annual profit in 2012. The company posted full-year earnings of $44.9 billion, up 9 percent over 2011. It missed the all-time earnings record earned by ExxonMobil in 2008 by only $300 million. Gas prices rose throughout 2012, reaching a record annual average of $3.60 for regular gas. Such profits dwarf the $1.7 million fine imposed on ExxonMobil just four days before Friday's spill over the July 2011 oil spill into the Yellowstone River, which leaked 1,500 gallons.

Both of these major oil spills come just three years after the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, which resulted from the explosion of an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico that killed 11 workers in the worst environmental catastrophe in US history. Before the spill was finally capped three months later, 4.9 million barrels of oil had erupted into the waters, causing hundreds of billions of dollars of damage to local economies from Texas to Florida and impacting human health in the ecosystem for decades to come.

The last three years have not been bereft of other oil-related accidents. Less than 24 hours after BP settled for a $4.5 billion fine last November on all criminal charges related to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, an explosion aboard an oil rig owned by Black Elk Energy in the Gulf of Mexico killed two workers and left four with serious burns. Only 28 gallons of oil leaked as a result of this explosion, which kept it from being classified as a major spill. One of Shell's two arctic oil drilling rigs ran ashore in Alaska on January 3, 2013, carrying 12,000 gallons of lubrication oil and hydraulic fluid. Fortunately, all of the workers were successfully evacuated, and no oil was spilled.

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