

# Pipeline in Santa Barbara oil spill lacked key safety feature

**Kevin Martinez****26 May 2015**

Cleanup from last week's oil spill in Santa Barbara County continued over the weekend, with at least 650 workers and 17 boats collecting crude oil around Refugio State Beach. So far 9,492 gallons of oily water and 1,250 cubic yards of oil-tainted soil have been collected, out of an estimated 105,000 gallons of crude oil that spilled from an underground pipeline onto the coast and into the ocean.

On Saturday, Rick McMichael, the director of pipeline operations for Plains All American Pipeline, the owner of the ruptured oil pipeline, said that cleanup crews have removed 15,540 gallons of crude oil from within the pipeline in order to prepare it for inspection. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration has ordered the company to ship the ruptured pipe for metallurgical testing to determine what happened.

The pipeline was the only one of its kind in Santa Barbara County not to have an automatic shutoff valve. According to Kevin Drude, deputy director of the county's Energy and Minerals Division, the original owner of the pipeline successfully argued in the late 1980s in court that the company could avoid implementing the county requirement of a shutoff valve because it was part of an interstate network and since automatic shutoff valves were not required by federal regulators, they never installed one.

Drude told KQED News, "It's the only major pipeline that doesn't have auto shutoff. For us, it's routine."

At least 21,000 gallons of crude oil made its way into the ocean since last Tuesday's spill poured 105,000 gallons into a culvert. A significant number of fish and other wildlife, including five pelicans and a sea lion, have been killed.

Federal regulators have ordered Plains to remove the

damaged pipeline before they can begin pumping oil again.

Santa Barbara County has regulations that exceed state and federal laws, one of which is the requirement that pipelines have valves that detect a leak and shut down automatically. In 1997, when an offshore drilling platform began leaking crude oil, an operator overrode the automatic shutdown and spilled 10,000 gallons of oil into the ocean and shoreline.

Last Tuesday's spill was discovered when a Plains worker spotted the leak three hours after mechanical issues were detected with the pipeline, according to the company. The pipe was restarted for 20 minutes before a pipe failed because of changes in pressure. At this point it is not certain what caused the pipe to break down.

Plains All American Pipeline has accumulated 175 safety and mechanical violations since 2006, according to federal records. The Environmental Protection Agency sued the company for a series of oil spills in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Kansas in 2010.

The company reported 223 accidents and spilled a total of 864,300 gallons of hazardous materials since 2006, according to federal records. The company was also the subject of 25 enforcement actions by the federal government and had to pay out \$32 million in damages.

According to a *Los Angeles Times* analysis of data from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, Plains had an incident rate per mile of pipe more than three times the national average. Of the more than 1,700 pipeline operators in the US, only four had a worse average than Plains. The company owns and operates more than 18,000 miles of pipeline and reported \$43 billion in revenue in 2014 and \$878 million in profit.

The Santa Barbara spill originated from an 11-mile-long pipeline that is part of a larger oil network in Kern County. The company has said it inspected the integrity of the pipeline two weeks ago but did not receive the results in time to take action before the spill.

The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration also fined the company \$115,600 in penalties over the last 10 years for infractions including failure to maintain adequate firefighting gear and relying on local volunteer fire departments. The company also failed to install equipment to prevent pipe corrosion, failed to complete repairs that were recommended by inspectors and failed to keep record of inspections of “breakout tanks,” which are used to ease pressure in pipelines.

The Environmental Protection Agency also cited the company in violation of the Clean Air Act for a storage facility in Kern County that did not have the appropriate permits and equipment.



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