

New details emerge of attempted cover-up in investigation of Southern California oil spill

Dan Conway
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The investigation into the October 1 oil spill off of the coast of Southern California is now in its second week while cleanup efforts are still only in their earliest stages. Booms used to control the ingress of the oil slick into sensitive wetlands have mostly failed, putting many species of migratory birds and other wildlife at risk. According to official estimates, the spill led to up to 131,000 gallons of oil seeping into the Pacific Ocean. Oil has been spotted from the port city of Long Beach just south of Los Angeles all the way down to San Diego.

Investigators now believe a ship's anchor struck a portion of the 18-mile pipeline from where the spill originated, displacing it by 105 feet and ripping off a portion of the pipeline's concrete casing. While this event by itself likely happened weeks and even months before the pipeline ruptured, it led to that section being dangerously exposed to future natural or manmade events ultimately leading to the 13-inch rupture last Friday causing the spill. However, the total length of the displaced pipeline was nearly 4,000 feet leading to questions about why the pipeline operators either never noticed or reported the issue.

The pipeline ends at the BETA pump station in Long Beach and originates at the Elly oil rig owned by Amplify Energy Corporation. Based out of Houston, Texas, Amplify Energy owns approximately 1,000 oil wells and 1,500 natural gas wells across the US. Through its Beta Offshore subsidiary, Amplify runs three connected oil rigs off the coast of Los Angeles known as Elly, Ellen and Eureka. The Eureka and Ellen oil rigs are production rigs while Elly separates the crude from other two rigs into water, oil and gas and then sends the oil through the pipeline which is separately managed by the San Pedro Bay Pipeline company.

The Beta Offshore company has been cited a total of 125 times for safety and environmental violations over the course of the last 40 years but has only paid a total of

\$85,000 in fines involving three particular safety incidents. Inspections of the sites, moreover, are typically carried out by third party outfits contracted by Amplify itself.

Establishing a timeline of events around last week's spill, investigators found that a low-pressure alarm went off on the Elly oil rig at 2:30 a.m. on Saturday morning, October 2. At 8:55 a.m. the same day, an employee at a firm used by Amplify Energy for crisis management reported an oil spill to federal authorities with the Office of Emergency Services.

However, multiple reports of foul-smelling air had been made by residents of coastal Orange County the previous day and the first report of a spill did not originate from the rig operators but from a ship that reported a large oil slick on the surface of the water 4.5 nautical miles west of Huntington Beach at 6 p.m. on Friday.

That same evening, satellite imagery which was used to further examine the spill showed a total surface area for the spill of 2.8 by 0.7 nautical miles. An emergency response command center comprised of federal and state environment authorities was then formed to investigate. However, it was already after dark by that time, hampering further investigations until the following morning.

Richard Charter, a senior fellow for the Ocean Foundation, said to the *Los Angeles Times* of the timing of the response, "You don't have pressure drop in a pipeline and not know about it. And that raises the question, 'Why did the response kick in a day late?' Somebody did nothing. You shouldn't have to wait until the oil's lapping up on the shoreline to find out that you've had an oil spill."

Robert Bea, co-director of the Center for Catastrophic Risk Management at the University of California, Berkeley, related that that if the first sightings of an oil sheen occurred on Friday night, low-pressure alarms

should have gone off in the rig control room as soon as the leak began, assuming the alarms were working correctly.

However, Martyn Willshire, Amplify Energy's Chief Executive Officer, stated in a Monday, October 4 press conference that the company was unaware of any reports of spills on the Friday beforehand and acted promptly to contain the spill once they became aware of it Saturday morning. "We noticed the sheen, immediately contacted the platforms, and the platforms instantaneously started the incident plan," Wilshire said. He further claimed that the company did not see oil on the water until 8:09 a.m. raising further questions as to why the low-pressure alarms were either ignored or not properly acted upon.

Public officials also initially downplayed the extent of the spill even though they had already received multiple reports that the oil sheen was spreading for miles. One Coast Guard official told the *Los Angeles Times* on the afternoon of October 2 that "We were alerted [about the spill] quickly. We really believe we will keep this to a small contained incident."

In an attempt to reinsure investors after the company's stock value dropped by more than half last week, Willshire stated that the company had a sufficient combination of liquidity and insurance coverage to deal with damages from the incident. These will likely be considerable, not as a result of government fines and sanctions, which will amount to no more than a slap on the wrist, but from various multimillion-dollar lawsuits which have already been launched against the company.

In addition to a criminal investigation led by the US Coast Guard, a class-action lawsuit has already been initiated by an expanding group of business and property owners in the Huntington Beach area seeking damages for lost business and decreased property valuations, the sum total of which will doubtless be in the many millions of dollars. What is still coming to light, however, is the immense damage caused to fragile ecosystems and the health effects of the spill on animal life as well as those who live in the affected areas, which are expected to be quite considerable.

The oil spill has also become a major embarrassment for the administration of Democratic governor Gavin Newsom and US president Joe Biden who both falsely posture as environmentally conscious opponents of the fossil fuel industry.

Despite their pledges of making the state and the country "carbon neutral" within the next few decades, both in reality have done nothing to in any way

significantly reduce oil and gas emissions. Newsom himself had his early political career almost entirely bankrolled by the Getty oil family while the Biden administration's Department of the Interior has already seen the largest number of permits approved to drill on federal land since the George W. Bush administration.

Biden's Interior Secretary Deborah Haaland, hailed for her Native American ancestry which would supposedly supersede class allegiance on matters of environmental safety, noted in relation to the permits that "Gas and oil production will continue well into the future, and we believe that is the reality of our economy and the world we're living in."

The push for expanded production is also affecting antiquated outfits like the Elly rig. The rig itself was constructed in 1980 by Royal Dutch Shell and is now long past the time when significant quantities of usable oil can be easily extracted. While the push to cut costs across the oil industry is strong, it is especially so throughout California, in which oil is still being extracted out of wells which have been in operation for many decades and in some cases more than a century.

Cost cutting measures and lack of safety enforcement also played a role in the 2010 Deep Water Horizon BP oil spill, which remains the most catastrophic oil spill in US history. A US government report issued in 2011 found defective cement on the well and investigators later found inadequate safety systems in place and rather than identifying a single root cause of the incident, found "systemic" root causes which led to the massive catastrophe across the Gulf Coast.

While new information will inevitably come to light leading to a more specific picture around the events of October 1 and October 2, what is certain is that the events that occurred on the pipeline and the Elly rig are likely to be repeated. There are no elements within the Democratic or Republican parties who will make any serious attempts to curb the disastrous activities of the fossil fuel industry and make a real and meaningful change towards clean energy to reverse or even mitigate the effects of climate change. That task instead falls to the international working class in the fight for socialism.



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