

# Questions remain in aftermath of disastrous Southern California oil spill

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Investigators are still looking into the causes of the October 1 pipeline spill that released tens of thousands of gallons of oil across the coast of Southern California. Initial estimates of the spill were as high as 131,000 gallons although this has been downgraded to a little over 25,000 gallons. This latest estimate, however, cannot be taken at face value as favorable ocean currents prevented much of the toxic effluent from reaching the coastline where most of the cleanup and measurement activities took place.

Even the lowered estimate, however, is more than 10 times larger than what regulators had predicted when designing the offshore oil rigs in the late 1970s. Regulators had predicted in 1978 that a spill emanating from the Elly rig, the site of the October 1 disaster, would result in a spill of only 50 barrels of oil or 2,100 gallons.

An actual determination of the amount of oil released in the current disaster, however, has been complicated by the public disclosures of Amplify Energy which thus far have been less than credible.

According to Amplify, which owns the Elly rig, a low-pressure alarm went off in the early morning hours of Saturday, October 2, prompting operators to shut down the pipeline only a few hours late. The day before, however, multiple coastal residents and ships noted huge oil slicks across the surface of the water, indicating that the spill actually occurred a day earlier than the company reported.

Amplify, which owns more than 1,000 oil wells and 1,500 natural gas wells across the world, is now the subject of multiple lawsuits and investigations as a result of the spill. The company's offshore subsidiary, Beta, also runs the two rigs connected to Elly—Ellen and Eureka. The subsidiary has been cited a total of 125 times for safety violations since 1981 but has only been

fined a total of \$85,000 for infractions involving just three of the violations.

Based on current findings, it appears that, while Amplify Energy was likely negligent in its response to the spill, it was a ship's anchor that likely either directly caused the leak or created the most favorable conditions for it. Why ships are allowed to travel through areas in which their heavy anchors can strike such pipelines remains an unanswered question.

After the spill was reported in early October, investigators found that an approximately 4,000-foot section of the pipeline had been displaced in a bow-shaped pattern. The maximally displaced portion measured 105 feet with clear indications that the pipeline's outer concrete casing had been ripped away. Such damage is consistent with the pipeline being dragged along the ocean floor by a ship's anchor.

When investigating the latest incident, however, a significant amount of marine growth on the pipeline was found by divers indicating that it was initially struck months in advance of the disaster and that a second incident, either natural or human in origin, led to a 13-inch gash from whence the oil flowed out.

Concerns have been raised over a repeated occurrence with a record number of ships anchored off the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach due to an ongoing supply chain bottleneck. Each of the massive cargo container ships has anchors weighing over 60,000 pounds (approximately 9 metric tons). With an increasing number of ships indefinitely parked at sea the risk that an anchor will be dragged over another section of pipeline only increases.

On the basis of archived GPS data, investigators have narrowed down the list of ships that may have caused the incident and believe that the initial strike occurred on the pipeline in late January 2021. On Saturday, the

Coast Guard designated the owner and operators of the cargo ship MSC DANIT as parties of interest in the spill, meaning that they are officially under investigation and have a right to obtain legal counsel in the matter. Federal investigators boarded the ship over the weekend off the Port of Long Beach after its voyage from China.

The DANIT's owner is the MSC Mediterranean Shipping Company headquartered in Switzerland. The company has a fleet of 600 vessels and an international workforce of more than 100,000 employees. While it appears that the DANIT may be singled out as the main culprit in the pipeline displacement incident, Coast Guard Lt. SondraKay Keen pointed out last weekend that the investigation was still ongoing. "We're still looking at multiple vessels and scenarios," she said.

A congressional committee started hearings on Monday to determine responsibility for the disaster. The hearing was held in the Orange County city of Irvine and was co-chaired by U.S. Representative Katie Porter, an Orange County Democrat and chair of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and Representative Alan Lowenthal, a Long Beach Democrat who chairs the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources. Said Porter, "I want to assure the public, this committee will do oversight to make sure there is a full, fair and complete investigation of the circumstances surround the leak."

Regardless of the degrees of responsibility assigned by investigators, the disaster as a whole is a profound indictment of capitalism and its inability to adopt environmentally sustainable means of energy production even though such technology has existed for decades.

Such disasters are now being facilitated by the Biden administration which during the course of the 2020 presidential campaign positioned itself as the antidote to the anti-scientific policies of Trump. The Biden administration has overseen the approval of the largest number of permits to drill on federal land in a single year since the days of the George W. Bush administration.

Similar to its response to the deadly coronavirus pandemic which it falsely asserts is something that population will just have to "learn to live with," the capitalist ruling elite has increasingly contended that

fossil fuel and climate change are facts of life for which the population will simply have to adapt. According to Deb Haaland, Biden's Interior Secretary, "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 overwhelming consensus of environmental scientists, however, is that the effects of climate change can be mitigated and even reversed. This will not be possible, however, if left in the hands of the profit interests of capitalism. This task, and the tasks of preventing oil pipeline disasters like October 1 or the BP oil spill of 2010, falls to the international working class.



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