



Onshore Oil Disasters

Why tar sands pipelines are dirty and dangerous, despite the industry's PR tactics to portray otherwise.

Bringing More Oil Disasters Onshore

Following the BP oil spill catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, the oil industry asserted that it was an exceptional, once-in-a-lifetime event for an otherwise safe and responsible industry. While this disaster was unfolding, the industry started promoting Canadian tar sands, the world's dirtiest source of oil, as a safe alternative to offshore drilling.

The U.S. currently consumes about 800,000 barrels per day of this dirty fuel and the industry plans to increase this amount by more than fourfold over the next two decades by expanding production in Alberta, Canada and creating a web of pipelines to deliver it to refineries in the U.S. The industry claims that this will be a safe way to meet America's demand for oil. But the record shows that tar sands and oil pipelines are not safe – the industry's plan only increases the likelihood that the next oil disaster will happen onshore.

The Record Shows Pipelines Break

The industry's safety record shows a consistent pattern of safety incidents including spills, leaks, fires, explosions, toxic emissions and water pollution. According to the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), between 1990 and 2009, there were 5,626 pipeline 'significant incidents' nationwide that caused 365 fatalities, 1,553 injuries, \$4.4 billion in property damage, and 2.5 million barrels spilled into the environment.¹ And although the industry also assures that its safety record is always improving, it has not strayed much from a yearly average of 280 'significant incidents' over the last two decades.

Keystone XL Tar Sands Pipeline – The Next Oil Disaster

TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL Pipeline Project is the latest and largest effort by the oil industry to increase America's dependence on tar sands oil. The 2,000 mile pipeline would go from Alberta, Canada through six U.S. states to deliver the dirty fuel to refineries on the Gulf Coast. It would threaten communities, water and wildlife through America's heartland with oil spills and deliver more harmful pollution to the communities surrounding the Gulf Coast refineries.

Although the pipeline has yet to be approved by the federal government, TransCanada has already tried to cut corners on safety. The company had applied to the U.S. Department of Transportation for a special permit, essentially a safety waiver, to build the pipeline with thinner steel and operate it at higher pressure than is allowed under existing regulations. But after stakeholders from the communities along the pipeline's proposed route, members of Congress, and the Environmental Protection Agency all expressed major concerns about the proposal, TransCanada withdrew its special permit application.

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¹ Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, Significant Pipeline Incidents:
<http://primis.phmsa.dot.gov/comm/reports/safety/SigPSI.html?nocache=2062>



TransCanada has been using this move to portray a concern for safety. But considering that the company only abandoned the most overtly dangerous part of the proposal in response to public pressure, it only raises the question of what else TransCanada would do to cut corners on safety if the pipeline were built. Additionally, the company can still re-apply for a special permit in the future. Regardless, sneaky PR moves cannot erase the oil industry's track record; pipelines are already a dirty, deadly business and special permits only mean more danger to Americans.

TransCanada has already reported two leaks in its first Keystone pipeline, which both occurred in South Dakota before the pipeline was placed into commercial service on June 30th, 2010. While only minor, these incidents occurred just after the pipeline was built, raising the question of what's in store for the future. Some evidence suggests that this pipeline might even have been built with substandard steel.² Looking at pipeline safety performance over the last several years can give us a preview of what to expect if the Keystone XL pipeline is built.

Pipelines Fiascos Since 2006

The industry's track record shows that pipelines are incident-prone. Just between 2006 and 2009, PHMSA reports that there have been over 1,000 pipeline 'significant incidents' that resulted in 56 fatalities, 208 injuries, \$950 million in property damage, and over 1.6 million gallons of spilled hazardous liquids. The following is a sampling of some of the worst pipeline fiascos since 2006:

July 26th, 2010: An underground Enbridge, Inc. pipeline released more than 1 million gallons of oil into Michigan's Kalamazoo River. The spill contaminated 20 miles of the river and the local drinking water supply. More than 50 homes near the spill site were evacuated.

June 12th, 2010: Oil was found streaming from Red Butte Creek near Salt Lake City, Utah after a Chevron Oil Co. pipeline leaked 33,600 gallons of oil on its way to the nearby refinery. The oil was stopped before it ran into the Great Salt Lake, but 200 birds were coated with oil.

July 25th, 2009: A pipeline leak of crude oil at Eugene Island Pipeline System in the Gulf of Mexico spilled about 63,000 gallons of oil 33 miles offshore of Louisiana. The spill covered 80 square miles of Gulf waters, and was due to a crack in the system's pipeline.

November 28th, 2007: Two workers were killed after the Enbridge, Inc. pipeline they were working on caught fire near Clearbrook, Minnesota. The pipeline had leaked two weeks earlier and a temporary repair had been put in place.

November 1st, 2007: Two people were killed, 7 were injured, and 4 homes were destroyed when 430,000 gallons of liquid propane were released from a ruptured pipeline and ignited in Carmichael, Mississippi. An additional 70 acres of woodland were also devastated in the area.

June 5th, 2006: Three workers were killed when explosions and a fire rocked the Partridge Raleigh oilfield in Raleigh, Mississippi. The workers, all employees of Stringer's Oilfield Services, were completing piping connections when welding sparks ignited the blast.

March 2nd, 2006: A leak in a BP pipeline on the tundra of Alaska's North Slope spilled 267,000 gallons of crude oil for five days before detection by the company. The leak was part of a widespread corrosion problem in 16 of the 22 miles of the pipeline.

To prevent the next onshore oil disaster, National Wildlife Federation recommends:

- 1) Denial of the presidential permit for the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline.
- 2) Stricter oversight and enforcement standards for new and existing pipelines by PHMSA.

To learn more about tar sands pipelines, visit: www.nwf.org/tarsands

² Plains Justice, Letter to Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration requesting investigation of possible use of substandard steel in the Keystone Pipeline: <http://plainsjustice.org/power-generation-resources/>