Saltwater Pipeline Bursts, Swamping Farm, Wetlands

MOHALL, N.D. (AP) — State regulators are investigating the cause of a ruptured pipeline that spilled several thousand gallons of saltwater and contaminated some 40 acres of cropland and wetlands in western North Dakota.

Terrell Dobkins, vice president of operations for Frisco-based Petro Harvester Operating Co., owner of the 3-inch plastic pipeline, said the spill was discovered last week near Mohall and immediately reported state authorities. The company said more than 12,000 gallons, or some 300 barrels, of the briny water likely leaked from the ruptured pipeline, but county and state officials said they suspect it could be many times that.

Saltwater, an unwanted byproduct found with crude and natural gas in underground reservoirs, is usually transported by tankers or pipelines and re-injected into underground wells.

Kris Roberts, an environmental scientist with the North Dakota Health Department, said Thursday that the cause of the pipeline rupture is under investigation. He said the amount of the spill and the extent of the damage is still unknown.

"Even the company admits the 300-barrel figure is an educated guess," he said. "The impact appears to be significant. "

Roberts said he visited the spill site Tuesday with investigators from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, but they were unable to do a thorough assessment because of stormy weather.

"Lightning chased us off the site," he said. "We are planning next week to fully delineate the area."

Roberts said the company has hired an environmental consultant to assess the spill and built containment berms to keep the saltwater from spreading.

"The pipeline has been repaired but the cleanup to our way of thinking has not started," Roberts said. "Given the size and complexity, it may be complicated."

Farmer Darwin Peterson rents the contaminated land from owners in Minnesota. He said he didn't learn about the rupture until Monday, after he called the company with concerns over the weekend.

The property is a mixture of farmland and wetlands. Peterson said he did not plant crops this spring on the area affected by the spill and now it won't be usable for

future planting.

Cattails in surrounding sloughs are dying and large streaks of grayish salt and black oil show where the saltwater flowed across the land, he said.

Dobkins said Petro Harvester has reported at least six smaller spills this year, with only a few barrels of oil lost in each incident. Petro Harvester bought its assets from another company, and the equipment is old, he said.

"We've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars repairing equipment in both the surface and down hole to get these things back in shape," Dobkins said.

The company will clean up the spill and be proactive in preventing future spills, he said.

"We'll be taking measures to put in controls to help us monitor and prevent these types of occurrences," Dobkins said.

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