Senate Passes Pipeline Safety Bill Doubling Fines

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate has given final approval to a bill that doubles the maximum fine for pipeline safety violations and adds penalties for obstructing safety investigations, but sidesteps several key recommendations arising from investigations of a deadly natural gas explosion and two high-profile oil spills over the past two years.

The compromise bill cleared the Senate late Tuesday by a voice vote and now goes to the White House for President Barack Obama's signature. The House approved the same measure on Monday. The measure is the result of weeks of negotiation between advocates of tougher safety rules and lawmakers who wanted to avoid overburdening industry with unnecessary regulation.

Communities that neighbor pipelines "can rest a little easier knowing that Congress has implemented tougher safety rules," Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said in a statement.

Safety advocates said the bill is a modest step forward. They complained that it doesn't follow through on several key recommendations arising from investigations of a 2010 gas pipeline explosion that killed eight people, injured dozens of others and damaged or destroyed more than 100 homes in a suburban neighborhood near San Francisco, as well as two recent high-profile oil spills in Michigan and Montana.

The United States has approximately 2.3 million miles of pipelines that transport oil, natural gas, and hazardous liquids. Since 2006, there have been about 40 serious pipeline incidents each year that resulted in a fatality or injuries.

The bill doubles the maximum fine for pipeline safety violation to $2 million and authorizes the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration to hire 10 more safety inspectors. That's far fewer new inspectors than most safety experts say the agency needs.

The bill would allow the transportation secretary to require that newly constructed pipelines include automatic shutoff valves that isolate a section of pipe in event of a rupture, preventing further gas or liquid from escaping. But the National Transportation Safety Board said in its investigation of the California gas explosion that the valves are especially needed on aging pipelines in highly populated areas. Pipeline operators don't want to be forced to install valves in those areas because it costs significantly more to install valves on lines already in place than lines being newly laid.

In the California accident, gas continued to escape for nearly 90 minutes after the rupture, feeding a giant pillar of fire that was at times 80 feet high. Investigators said the damage would have been less severe had automatic valves been in place.

The bill would require that federal regulators hold off for at least two-and-a-half years before they issue new rules to require pipeline operators to inspect the structural integrity of major transmission lines in lightly populated areas. But the bill has a caveat that allows regulations to be issued if the transportation secretary determines there's a public safety risk.

The bill would also bar regulators from setting standards for industry on detecting leaks for at least two years.

Lawmakers said they wanted more time for Congress and the administration to study some of the safety issues.

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