Witness Describes Horrific Pipeline Inferno

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — To Sue Bonham, it was as if the world were coming to an end: A wall of flame had suddenly engulfed her West Virginia neighborhood. Amid a deafening roar, objects began crashing through her ceiling. Her home began melting around her and a nearby house, her step-daughter's, collapsed in a heap of ashes.

An intense, suffocating heat prevented the Sissonville woman from fleeing her home. She thought of escaping to her in-ground pool — learning later that the flames had driven its water to deadly, scalding temperatures.

"(I was) thinking the earth would open up at any moment and swallow me," Bonham told a Monday field hearing of the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee. The chairman, West Virginia Sen. Jay Rockefeller, held the hearing in his state's capital city.

The apocalypse Bonham witnessed was a natural gas pipeline explosion. A 1960s-era section of underground pipe had lost 70 percent of its thickness to outside corrosion. It ruptured about 12:41 p.m. on Dec. 11, triggering an inferno that ran

the length of nearly four football fields along the pipeline and radiated out by about 840 feet.

The blast hurled a 20-foot section of pipe more than 40 feet. No one was killed or seriously injured. Bonham was treated for smoke inhalation. But the explosion and resulting fireball destroyed four homes and charred a stretch of Interstate 77 less than 113 feet away, shutting down all lanes until the following morning.

Rockefeller convened the hearing seeking lessons from the blast and other recent mishaps. They include a September 2010 pipeline blast in San Bruno, Calif., that killed eight people, injured dozens and destroyed dozens of homes, and a July 2010 pipeline rupture that spewed 843,000 gallons of heavy crude oil into Michigan waterways — the most expensive onshore spill in U.S. history.

With his fellow West Virginian, Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, Rockefeller heard from government officials, an executive with Sissonville pipeline operator Columbia Gas Transmission and a watchdog group's president, as well as Bonham.

National Transportation Safety Board Chairwoman Deborah Hersman said each of the three incidents involved pipelines from the 1960s or older. With more than 2.5 million miles of gas pipeline snaking across the country, including thousands of miles that stretch beneath or beside communities, about half the network was built before 1970, Hersman said.

"If a pipeline is adequately maintained and inspected properly, its age is not the critical factor. The condition of the pipe is the critical factor," Hersman said.

Hersman and other witnesses also said technology can help operators monitor their pipelines more closely.

The Sissonville explosion prompted Columbia Gas officials to shut down that pipeline and two others nearby, as they could not tell which one had ruptured. Operators of the Michigan pipeline did not realize they had a leak until 17 hours after it began, with three separate shifts of employees failing to detect the rupture. In both cases, the operators were alerted by outside phone calls, not their control rooms.

"I think control room protocols and procedures are critical, and I think folks need to have adequate training and have the proper authority to shut down a system to make sure there are no ruptures or leaks," said Susan Fleming of the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

The discussion focused largely on automatic or remote-controlled shut-off valves. Fleming said operators decide whether to install them on a case-by-case basis. Jimmy Staton, group chief executive for Columbia Gas parent NiSource Gas Transmission and Storage, said his company was considering installing them on the Sissonville section. But Staton also said that such valves can create their own problems, particularly on that kind of pipeline.

However, Rick Kessler, board president of The Pipeline Safety Trust watchdog group, said he's heard industry concerns about such technology throughout his nearly 20 years overseeing these issues. He added, "It's really starting to ring a bit hollow."

"The U.S. government entrusts some of its most sensitive military operations to remotely controlled drones, yet somehow we can't have the technology to safely operate a shut-off valve by remote control?" Kessler said.

Cynthia Quarterman, head of the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, said the Sissonville pipeline will remain out of service until her agency approves a restart plan. It will then operate with pressure reduced by one-fifth while agency engineers monitor and test its performance, Quarterman said.

Before the hearing, Rockefeller criticized the U.S. Office of Management of Budget, alleging the agency was slowing down potential safety rules meant to respond to the Sissonville explosion and similar accidents. No one from the agency could be reached for comment immediately Monday.

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Online:

U.S. Senate field hearing details, testimony: http://1.usa.gov/Wxzh9F *[1]*

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