Ark. Asks ExxonMobil to Move Pipeline Near Water Supply

JEANNIE NUSS, Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Officials with an Arkansas water supplier approved a measure Thursday asking ExxonMobil for a plan to move an oil pipeline away from an area that drains into the main source of drinking water for Little Rock and several other communities.

The move by Central Arkansas Water's Board of Commissioners comes nearly two weeks after ExxonMobil's Pegasus pipeline ruptured and spilled thousands of barrels of oil in Mayflower, a small city about 25 miles northwest of Little Rock.

ExxonMobil has said the March 29 spill didn't affect Mayflower's drinking water supply, which comes from a lake about 65 miles away and is managed by a different supplier.

But that hasn't ended concerns about drinking water in the region, as the pipeline runs through part of the Lake Maumelle Watershed, the area that drains into the main drinking water supply for hundreds of thousands of people.

Central Arkansas Water's board is also asking ExxonMobil to come up with short-term solutions to reduce the risk of an oil spill in the watershed.

"Even with all these measures that we're trying to do to minimize our risk and improve our emergency response, there's really no guarantee unless the pipeline itself is removed from the watershed," said Robert Hart, a technical services officer with Central Arkansas Water.

Central Arkansas Water asked ExxonMobil officials to attend Thursday's meeting, but no one from the company showed up. During a press conference earlier in the day, ExxonMobil on-scene coordinator Karen Tyrone said company officials had spoken with people from Central Arkansas Water.

"We understand their concerns," Tyrone said. "... They understand that we're in a recovery effort right now and our focus right now is the Mayflower community."

Officials said residents of four of the more than 20 homes evacuated because of the oil spill could go home as early as Thursday. Federal on-scene coordinator Nick Brescia said the residents of eight or nine other homes could return in the coming days.

It's not clear when the rest could come back, but some people may not want to return as cleanup crews and their heavy equipment are still trying to get rid of what's left of the spill.

"We have not had a strong interest to get back into homes," Tyrone said.

So far, crews have recovered more than 28,000 barrels of oily water and about 2,000 cubic yards of oiled soil and debris, according to a statement from ExxonMobil and local officials. Officials estimate that about 5,000 barrels of oil spilled, though a final number isn't expected until the pipeline has been repaired and refilled.

Officials hope to remove the ruptured part of the Pegasus pipeline in the next few days, Tyrone said. Then, investigators may be able to piece together why it ruptured.

"You cannot know what happened until you get this piece of pipe out and you get it to a lab," she said.

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