Arkansas AG: Oil Spill Shows Need for Inspections

JEANNIE NUSS, Associated Press

MAYFLOWER, Ark. (AP) — An ExxonMobil pipeline that ruptured and spilled thousands of barrels of oil in central Arkansas last week highlights the need for pipeline maintenance, inspections and safety standards, the state's attorney general said Wednesday.

A day after announcing an investigation into spill, Arkansas Attorney General Dustin McDaniel visited the small city of Mayflower where the Pegasus pipeline ruptured Friday, about 25 miles northwest of Little Rock. The pipeline that runs from Patoka, Ill., to the Texas Gulf Coast was built in 1947 and 1948, according to federal pipeline safety officials.

"I've been told repeatedly that Exxon was up-to-date on their inspections and their inspections showed no cause for concern," McDaniel told reporters. "But we have a pipeline that's 65 years old that ruptured in someone's yard, so either the inspections were not adequate or there was something that was completely beyond the ability to identify with an inspection, which I find very unlikely."

ExxonMobil Pipeline Co. maintains its inspections were up-to-date. The part of the pipeline that ruptured was inspected in 2010 and again in February, according to a corrective action order that federal pipeline safety officials issued Tuesday.

The company reported "no significant anomalies" found in the 2010 test, and the company has not yet received results from the 2013 inspection, according to the order from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

The Pegasus pipeline remains out of service. For that to change, ExxonMobil must get written approval from a federal pipeline safety official, according to the order.

Brigham McCown, a former deputy administrator for PHMSA, said the pipeline could be down for months, but he didn't think short-term oil prices would be affected.

"It's a smaller 20-inch line. It's not insignificant by any means, but I don't see it having a true shift in pricing," McCown said.

Investigators still are working to figure out what caused the rupture, but the corrective action order noted ExxonMobil reversed the pipeline's flow in 2006.

"A change in direction of flow can affect the hydraulic and stress demands on the pipeline," the order says.

McCown said the pipeline was reversed to help avoid a bottleneck in Cushing, Okla.,

where a lot of oil from up north ends up. But he said he didn't know that the reversal would cause the rupture.

"No one has any earthly idea what caused this accident," he said. "Most pipeline accidents are actually caused by unrelated third parties, meaning excavators, construction people, people who dig in their own yard without dialing 811 first."

McDaniel's office said many residents in the neighborhood where the pipeline ruptured said they were unaware the pipeline was there.

"That should never happen," McCown said. "... To avoid hitting a pipeline, you have to know where they are."

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