

Michigan oil spill forces evacuations

Regulators warned Enbridge of pipeline corrosion

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Dozens of families have been evacuated from their homes along streams and rivers in central Michigan in the wake of an oil spill from a ruptured pipeline, which likely took place on Sunday. Local health officials have also warned residents against drinking water from wells that may be contaminated by the oil.

Thirty-five miles of Tallmadge Creek and the Kalamazoo River have reportedly been affected, stretching between the Michigan cities of Marshall and Galesburg. There are fears the spill may eventually reach Lake Michigan. The Kalamazoo is a tributary to the third-largest Great Lake.

It was reported Thursday that the Pipeline Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) warned pipeline owner Enbridge in January that the pipe, which runs between Indiana and Ontario, was not sufficiently monitored for corrosion and was therefore in violation of federal regulations.

Enbridge claims that it complied with the request for corrosion monitoring. It is not known whether or not PHMSA, which functions under the Department of Transportation, followed up on its letter with further monitoring. Enbridge has received more than a dozen warnings and citations for safety and environmental regulations since 2002, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The 30-inch diameter pipeline, which carries crude oil as well as lighter synthetic oil, travels 1,900 miles from Griffith, Indiana, to its destination in Sarnia, Ontario. It serves refineries in Ontario, Detroit, and Toledo, Ohio.

Early reports from Enbridge on the volume of the spill and when it took place have been exposed as false. The Calgary, Canada-based firm first claimed that the spill took place late Monday morning. But many residents say that they first noticed the spill and felt

symptoms from exposure to oil fumes on Sunday morning.

Enbridge also claimed that 800,000 gallons of oil were spilled. But according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), upwards of 1 million gallons were spilled. The discrepancy is significant because any fine eventually assessed against the energy company will likely be based on the volume of the spill.

Unlike the BP Deepwater Horizon catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, it appears that the spill has been stopped. An Enbridge spokesman, Joe Martucci, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the flow of oil through the pipeline was suspended when the company became aware of the rupture.

However, this suspension appears to have taken place fully one day after the rupture occurred. Unless the rupture in the pipe was very small, this may cast some doubt on both Enbridge's and the EPA's spill estimates, since the carrying capacity of the pipeline is about 8 million gallons a day.

Enbridge has also been criticized for responding slowly to the disaster. Cleanup operations only began to contain the spill on Tuesday, residents say. The evacuation of nearby households, ordered by local officials, also began on Tuesday, two days after the spill took place.

The most pressing public health issue is air quality. Oil contains benzene, a volatile neurotoxin that is released into the atmosphere. In the long term, exposure to benzene is associated with a number of chronic ailments of the brain, the heart and the circulatory system. In the short term, inhalation causes headaches, dizziness, nausea, heart arrhythmia and shortness of breath.

Many residents who live close to Tallmadge Creek report experiencing precisely these symptoms as early

as Sunday morning.

Terry Reninger, a retired worker from a nearby Campbell's Soup plant, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he and his wife, Debbie, knew there was something wrong on Sunday. "Sunday night I first smelled it," Terry said. "My wife and I had headaches."

"I have almost a constant headache," Debbie added.

The Reningers have not been evacuated to a hotel, they said, because they do not have money to pay up front for a room. Enbridge will only reimburse, Terry explained. Neither state nor company officials have come to their home. "They haven't stopped by here," Terry said.

The WSWS spoke with Sue, a Walmart employee, and John, a truck driver from Battle Creek, as they looked at the oil-coated banks of the Kalamazoo River from a bridge near Marshall, Michigan.

"It was nasty Tuesday, I couldn't even stand to be here," Sue said. "And we thought we lived in paradise out here."

"There are ducks, geese, muskrats, swans, smallmouth bass, in that river," John said.

"My grandkids fish for smallmouth in that river," added Sue.

Adam, 22, also said that the spill was at its worst on Tuesday, two days after it took place. His family depends on well water. "I don't know if there's been any tests [on the well]," he said, as he bicycled back home from his job at McDonald's. "If it gets in, we'll have to get bottled water. It's a terrible smell that digs into everything. It's nasty stuff."

"Most people are watching all this oil spilling out down in the Gulf, and now here it is here in the middle of nowhere," Adam said. He explained that many tourists come to the area to kayak the river.

Enbridge spokesman Martucci told the WSWS that there is no known cause for the pipeline rupture and claimed that the company is focused on safety, a position avowed by the oil industry as a whole.

Recent history tells a different story. According to a study released by the National Wildlife Federation on Thursday and based on PHMSA data, 2,554 pipeline accidents took place in the US between 2001 and 2007, killing 161 people and injuring 576.

Michigan has experienced the ninth-most pipeline spills and accidents, with 61 in the seven-year span.

Five workers were killed in these accidents.

"The facts paint a picture of an industry where accidents, spills, leaks, explosions, fires and catastrophic carelessness in search of profit put American people, property and nature in harm's way every day," said the National Wildlife Federation's Tim Warman. "No state is untouched."



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