

Activists Use Spills to Highlight Risks

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A RASH OF OIL SPILLS EARLIER THIS YEAR has supplied anti-oil groups with plenty of fodder to raise safety concerns about the oil industry. There was a refinery spill in Arkansas, a train derailment spill in Minnesota, and then a storage terminal spill in Oklahoma. But it was images of a pipeline spill in Mayflower, Arkansas that drew national media attention.

THE MAYFLOWER SPILL

The Mayflower oil spill occurred when the Pegasus pipeline carrying Canadian Wabasca heavy crude from the Athabasca oil sands ruptured, releasing an estimated 5,000 barrels of crude. The Pegasus is an 850-mile pipeline built in the 1940s. In 2006, the pipeline was reversed to carry 95,000 barrels per day of crude from Illinois to Texas.

Early images of the spill showed crude oil running down a suburban street and into storm drains leading to nearby Lake Conway. Twenty-two homes had to be evacuated. First responders quickly built dikes to block culverts, stopping the crude from fouling the lake. The pipeline was shut soon after the leak was discovered.

The company used pumps and pads to clean the marshland soiled by the spill, and replaced a portion of storm drain system to return residents to their homes as quickly as possible.

A *National Geographic News* article covering the Mayflower spill noted: "Now, the broken conduit is at the center of a national debate – the plan to transport much larger volumes of heavy oil from the Canadian oil sands through the United States, through both older pipelines like Pegasus and new ones like the proposed Keystone XL."

U.S. Rep. Ed Markey, ranking member of the House Committee on Natural Resources, said pipeline incidents raised concerns about prospects for the TransCanada's Keystone XL pipeline. "The pipeline spill in Arkansas serves as a reminder that oil companies aren't doing a good job of transporting Canadian crude safely," Markey said.

FUELING THE KEYSTONE XL OPPOSITION

Supporters of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline argue that it would allow the U.S. to increase its energy security and reduce its dependence on foreign oil.



Maybe then, we'll see pipelines from the Midwest supplying finished product to the East and West Coast.

ETHANOL TRAINS CHALLENGED

Community activists around Boston say they won a key victory in blocking a plan that would bring railcars of ethanol through their communities. Residents fear the devastation that could be caused by an accidental derailment (or terrorist attack) of trains carrying over a million gallons of ethanol.

State lawmakers are considering an amendment to the state budget that would prevent issuing a license to any facility handling ethanol in densely populated communities.

If adopted, it may end plans for the Revere waterfront storage terminal to expand, or to transport ethanol over MBTA commuter rail lines. According to U.S. Rep. Mike Capuano, "Neither federal nor state law seems to provide ways to prevent ethanol from being transported through any community. To date, no other city has passed legislation banning the transit of hazardous materials and had the ban stand up in court."

PORTLAND PROTESTERS MISINFORMED

More than 1,000 activists rallied in Portland, Maine, recently to protest against the possibility of oil sands oil being brought in by pipeline from Montreal.

The company that owns the pipelines connecting western Canada to Montreal, and a separate company that owns the 236-mile pipeline from Portland to Montreal, both say there are no plans to bring oil sands oil across northern New England to Portland. The pipeline now carries oil that arrives by ship from overseas in Portland destined for Montreal.

"Opponents of oil sands oil are putting out misinformation," said an oil industry representative.

For better or worse, we can see social media has given the local activist a voice in our country's energy future. Someday, there probably will be an affordable alternative to oil, but until then, we still have to drive to work every day. ■

Environmental groups and politicians have raised concerns about the potential negative impacts of the Keystone XL project. The main issue is the risk of oil spills along the pipeline (similar to Mayflower) in environmentally sensitive areas. The real underlying issue here is the higher greenhouse gas emissions from the extraction of Canadian oil sands compared to conventional oil.

In response, TransCanada CEO Russ Girling pointed out that the Keystone XL pipeline will include 57 improvements above the standard requirements, specified by U.S. regulators. That makes it the most technologically advanced and safest pipeline ever proposed.

"The U.S. needs 10 million barrels a day of imported oil," argues Girling. "The proposed pipeline is not a debate of oil versus alternative energy. It is a debate about whether you want to get your oil from Canada or Venezuela or Nigeria."

He also argued that if Canadian oil doesn't reach the Gulf through an environmentally friendly buried pipeline, that oil will be brought in by tanker, producing even higher greenhouse gas emissions. TransCanada has said that development of oil sands will expand regardless of whether the crude oil is exported to the U.S., or alternatively to Asian markets.

Eventually, the Keystone XL pipeline will most likely be approved and built.