

Santa Barbara oil spill: Crude flowed 'well below' capacity in ruptured pipe

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Refugio State Beach, California (CNN)

The onshore, underground pipeline behind this week's Santa Barbara oil spill was operating "well below its maximum operating capacity" when it ruptured and leaked more than 100,000 gallons of crude, the oil company said Thursday. An estimated 21,000 gallons had gone into the Pacific Ocean. The rest was spilled on land.

What caused the oil spill, however, remains under investigation.

"Line 901 was not operating at capacity before or during the release," Rick McMichael of Plains All American Pipeline told reporters, carrying 1,300 barrels an hour, below its maximum capacity of 2,000 barrels an hour.

The spill was enough to prompt Gov. Jerry Brown to declare a state of emergency for Santa Barbara County.

"This emergency proclamation cuts red tape and helps the state quickly mobilize all available resources," Brown said Wednesday evening. "We will do everything necessary to protect California's coastline."

California mobilized crews from multiple state agencies to tackle the mess.

"I can tell you we have more than 100 people responding in the EOC (Emergency Operations Center) right now," said Brad Alexander, a spokesman for the California Office of Emergency Services. "They have several ships, scooping up oil and assessing the boundaries on the water," he said.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife also was on the scene with nine vessels collecting oil and containing the spill, according to its Twitter feed. More than 70 of its people were in the field collecting oil and protecting shorebirds.

SUMMARY/SOURCE CARDS: Notetaking & Source Recording

Meanwhile, Plains All American Pipeline is among the worst violators listed by the U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Administration.

The company has 175 federal safety and maintenance violations since 2006, responsible for more than 16,000 barrels in spills that have caused more than \$23 million worth of property damage. Between 2004 and 2007 alone, they violated federal environmental violations 10 times, the EPA said.

When asked about the firm's regulatory record, McMichael said the company reports every incident -- even those it's not required to document-- and two-thirds of them involved five or fewer gallons.

Pat Hutchins, the company's senior director of safety, said Plains has been committing money to safety improvements for the past seven years.

A backlash and consequences

A big concern is the environment around Refugio State Beach.

Crews continued to clean beaches and coastal waters, and officials reported that the leak killed an undisclosed number of lobsters, kelp bass and marine invertebrates. Six oil-soaked pelicans and one young sea lion were being rehabilitated, officials said.

There are shorebirds that live in the area -- the snowy plover and least tern nest on sandy beaches, and the cormorant can dive deep to find food. Officials want to make sure that none of the birds or other wildlife suffers damage from the spill.

"Every effort will be made to minimize the damage to the environment, including taking care of oiled wildlife," said Crossland.

"An aggressive and effective cleanup response to the spill is underway," said Mark Crossland with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "It will go on as long as necessary."

In the meantime, fishing and shellfish harvesting have been closed in Santa Barbara County until further notice.

A county emergency

As of Thursday night, vessels had skimmed 9,500 gallons of oily water from the ocean, McMichael said.

Seventeen vessels scoured the ocean surface, he said.

Workers dressed in white protective suits raked up balls of tar from the shore, sand and rocks and put them into plastic bags.

The Coast Guard has seven ships in the area, laying down protective booms, skimming the water and collecting the oil to prevent it from spreading.

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The cleanup could last months, officials said. For now, currents, tides and winds make the oil plume "a moving target" as it drifts offshore, said U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Jennifer Williams.

"It's a continual effort," added U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer David Mosley. "It's not something that we can say, 'Yeah, we are hitting it out of the park,' but it's something our guys are dedicated to."

The size of the spill, which began contaminating California's beaches on Tuesday, is equivalent to the volume of water the average American residence uses in a year.

No stranger to oil spills

This isn't the first oil spill suffered by scenic Santa Barbara. A spill in January 1969 became what was, at the time, the nation's worst offshore oil disaster.

In all, about 3 million gallons of oil spewed from a Union Oil drilling rig 5 miles off the coast of nearby Summerland, California. The pipe blowout cracked the seafloor, and the oil plume killed thousands of seabirds and "innumerable fish," according to an analysis by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

About 35 miles of coastline was coated with oil up to 6 inches thick, and about 800 square miles of ocean was affected, according to a paper by university geographers.

The 1969 disaster was so catastrophic and the media coverage so extensive that it gave birth to an environmental movement, a host of regulations against the oil and gas industry, and a new commission to protect California's coast, experts said.



[Santa Barbara Harbor after what was then the worst oil spill in U.S. history, in February 1969.]

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It energized a grass-roots movement that led to new federal and state environmental laws and helped establish the first Earth Day the next year.

Subsequent U.S. oil spills were much larger, including the Exxon Valdez accident, which dumped 11 million gallons off Alaska's shores in 1989, and the Deepwater Horizon spill of 210 million gallons in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.



[An oil spill contaminates Refugio and El Capitan State Beaches.]

The threat

Plains All American Pipeline Chairman Greg Armstrong said he was deeply sorry for the spill.

"We apologize for the damage that has been done to the wildlife and to the environment, and we're very sorry for the disruption and inconvenience that it has caused the citizens and visitors of this area," he said.

But this is little consolation to environmental groups.

"We continue to see it's not a question of if there is going to be an oil spill but when?" said Maggie Hall from the scene of the spill. She is an attorney with the Environmental Defense Center.

"It's a constant threat. And as you can see, the cleanup is not easy."

The Environmental Defense Center's executive director, Owen Bailey, said there were still a number of unanswered questions, such as why there was no automatic shutoff on the pipeline and why the early response was not more successful in halting the spill.

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"The fact is that oil development is innately risky," Bailey said. "We need to realize that allowing these dangerous industrial operations in our most sensitive environments will inevitably lead to oil spills -- the most predictable of accidents."