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Ruptured Montana Pipeline Was Shut Down Before

By DAN BILEFSKY and ANAHAD O'CONNOR

An Exxon Mobil pipeline that ruptured late Friday along the Yellowstone River in south-central Montana, spilling crude oil into the river and forcing evacuations, had been shut down for one day in May because of concerns over the rising waters on the Yellowstone, the company said Sunday.

The president of the Exxon Mobil Pipeline Company, Gary Pruessing, said in a conference call that the company decided to restart the line after examining its safety record and determining that the risks of failure were minimal.

The pipeline, which is buried about eight feet below the river, runs about 70 miles to Billings, Mont., where it supplies an Exxon refinery.

Mr. Pruessing said it was unclear what had caused the spill. In addition to sending 70 employees to clean up and investigate, Exxon said it was using contractors and airplanes to search for oil along the riverbank and to assess whether the shores had been damaged.

On Sunday, Exxon's team was joined by federal and state workers who traveled to the affected area to assess the damage. Mr. Pruessing said that company observers flying over the river had seen "very little soiling" beyond Billings.

Tim Thennis, a public assistance officer at the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services Division, told The Associated Press that the company's claim was reasonable but had not been independently verified. "My guess is that as fast as that water is moving, it's probably dissipating pretty quick," he said.

Claire Hassett, a spokeswoman for Exxon, said by telephone on Sunday that the company had reduced production at its refinery in Billings and shut down the pipeline after the leak, which the company estimated at 750 to 1,000 barrels. Industry experts said that the amount was relatively small, although it remained uncertain precisely how much oil had been leaked.

The company said that air-quality monitoring in the affected area was continuing and that there was no danger to public health. It said the impact of the spill on water quality had not been determined.

The pipeline burst about 10 miles west of Billings, coating parts of the Yellowstone River that run past Laurel — a town of about 6,500 downstream from the rupture — with shiny patches of oil. Throughout the weekend, cleanup crews in Laurel worked to lessen the impact of the spill, laying down absorbent sheets along the banks of the river to mop up some of the escaped oil and measuring fumes to determine the health threat.

Fearing a possible explosion, officials in Laurel evacuated about 140 people on Saturday just after midnight, then allowed them to return at 4 a.m. after tests showed that fumes from the leaked oil had dissipated, The Associated Press reported.

While the cause of the rupture was not immediately known, Brent Peters, the fire chief for Laurel, told the news agency that it might have been caused by high waters eroding parts of the riverbed and exposing the pipeline to debris.

The pipeline is 12 inches wide and runs to Billings, an area with three refineries, Exxon Mobil said. All three were shut down after the spill. Exxon Mobil said it had called in its North American Regional Response Team to help clean up the spill, and a Fire Department spokesman in Laurel said more than

100 people, including officials with the Environmental Protection Agency, were also dispatched.

In a statement, Exxon Mobil said it “deeply regrets this release and is working hard with local emergency authorities to mitigate the impacts of this release on the surrounding communities and to the environment.”

“The pipeline has been shut down and the segment where the release occurred has been isolated,” the statement added. “All appropriate state and federal authorities have been alerted.”

The rupture occurred around 11:30 p.m. Friday. Duane Winslow, a disaster and emergency services coordinator for Yellowstone County, told a local television station, KTVQ, that all oil companies with pipelines near the river were told to immediately shut them down, and that the damaged pipe was shut down within half an hour.

Mr. Winslow said drinking water in the surrounding area was being monitored and so far had been determined to be safe. Officials in Billings initially shut down water intake but later reopened it, KTVQ reported.



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