



Oil spill closes Gleniffer Lake

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Government officials are investigating the Pembina Pipeline Corp. breach that spilled between 75 and 125 barrels into the Red Deer River, which feeds Gleniffer Lake about five kilometres north of Sundre.

"Any time that you've got any quantity of oil coming in contact with a waterway, where there are people and wildlife, that's very serious," said Davis Sheremata, Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board spokesman.

The leak was discovered about 9:30 p.m. Sunday when Pembina's control centre in Edmonton noticed flow in the line where there shouldn't have been any.

The company's district superintendent, Sandy Buchan, who was on site Monday leading the cleanup, said the company shut down the line after an inspection about an hour later.

It wasn't until first light that Pembina was able to get a handle on the scope of the spill.

By early afternoon, a boom was stretched across the mouth of river at Gleniffer Lake to contain the slick. So far, there are no reports of fish or wildlife being affected by the oil, although the spill prompted Alberta Environment to shut off the water supply to the lake's residents and close it to recreational users.

"It's a bunch of oil stretched out over many kilometres of the river so it's not like great huge pools," said Buchan, whose company is working in co-operation with Alberta Environment on the cleanup.

Sheremata called the leak "larger than usual." Most pipeline failures are what he called pinhole leaks.

By comparison, in the 2005 spill at Wabamun Lake, caused by a CN train derailment, about 700,000 litres of Bunker C fuel oil and 88,000 litres of pole-treating oil fed into the water body, about 60 kilometres west of Edmonton.

The 400-metre-long segment of pipeline where the leak occurred runs under the river. The six-inch, low-pressure line was constructed in 2004 and carries sweet crude oil, which doesn't contain sour gas.

Sheremata said it was inspected twice during its construction and was fine the last time government staff checked it.

He said the investigation will determine what caused the leak, whether the company was in compliance with regulations and recommend whether any enforcement action should be taken.

"What we'll do is look at all the records for the pipeline in question, all the data as well as inspecting the pipeline itself. It could take a number of weeks," he said of the investigation, adding there is no history of problems with the line.

Enforcement action can lead to a company being inspected more often right up to the facility being shut down, depending on the violation.

According to ERCB's annual surveillance and compliance report to be released this week, seven facilities were shut down in Alberta last year for violating regulations, while 247 pipeline facilities and operations were suspended. The board has suspended 1,121 facilities and operations since 2000.

The ERCB reports that in 2007, pipeline failures were a record low in Alberta at 2.1 per 1,000 kilometres of pipeline, a 30 per cent drop from 2000.

However, pipelines constituted 63 per cent of all facilities and operations that were suspended last year

Of the 247 facilities and operations temporarily shut down for enforcement reasons, 156 were pipelines.

The agency says it has increased focus on inspecting pipelines during the last year, and found that of the 233 checks of pipeline operations, more than 20 per cent were found to be at high risk of non-compliance, with around only 36 per cent in full compliance.

"That's a big concern, quite frankly," said ERCB's Darin Barter, adding more stringent regulations are

coming into place in the next two years.

The largest cause of pipeline failures continues to be internal corrosion.

Monday's Pembina spill has left recreational users of Gleniffer Lake in limbo, with Alberta Environment officials calling it "closed until further notice."

Bill Gourley, general manager of the 613-site Carefee Resort, where about 175 people are living right now, said there is enough fresh water in a reservoir to last about 3 1/2 days.

"(Residents) are disappointed because it obviously interferes with their recreational and social life, having no water, no showers, no swimming pool," said Gourley.

He added that the resort will haul in water.

"At this point, we don't know what effect the pollutant will have," said Gourley, adding the company has communicated well with residents.

Alberta Environment spokeswoman Cheryl Robb said the oil was contained by late Monday afternoon and the cleanup was underway.

"The boom has been successfully deployed," she said, of the oil-absorbing material stretched across the river.

A skimmer is also on hand, but because the oil is not deep, it can't be used.

Debris along the shoreline is also being collected.

"Our priority today has been containment and cleanup," said Robb, adding that Alberta Environment will decide whether recreational users will be out of luck for what's expected to be the first nice weekend of the summer.

"There are a lot of people who will be coming on the weekend -- we'll have to determine that before then."

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