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Pipeline Spill into Red Deer River

Points to Huge Concerns With Provincial Pipeline Regulation

A pipeline leak north of Sundre, Alta. spilled between 1000 and 3000 barrels (160,000-475,000 litres) of light sour crude oil into the Red Deer River yesterday, a major drinking water source for southern Alberta, via Jackson Creek, which contains threatened bull trout. This news comes only weeks after a pipeline leak in northern Alberta spilled approximately 5,000 barrels (800,000 litres) of oil into surrounding peat wetlands.

AWA is alarmed by the frequency of pipeline spills across the province, and the short and long term effects of such disasters. "This is a pretty clear indication that the province is not doing enough to ensure the environmental and public health risks posed by pipelines are being managed," says Madeline Wilson, AWA conservation specialist. "These spills, no matter how big or small, are just symptoms of a deeper problem."

According to a statement released by the pipeline operator, Plains Midstream Canada did not detect the problem themselves, but was alerted of the leak late last night by the Sundre Petroleum Operators Group (SPOG). Similarly, in the May 19, 2012 Rainbow Lake pipeline failure, the pipeline operator was informed their pipeline was leaking by another company operating in the area.

In 2005 the Energy Resource Conservation Board (ERCB), the entity responsible for provincial pipeline regulation, estimated that for every 1000 km of pipeline, 2.4 failures occur per year. Considering Alberta is currently criss-crossed by over 400 000 km of energy-related pipeline, this predicts over 900 failures per year.

"Albertans should be extremely concerned that these pipeline spills keep happening and the weak detection systems in place," says Wilson. "Rather than doing more to make sure our environment is protected from disasters like this, the federal government's budget Bill C-38 will allow projects like pipelines to go ahead with less thorough environmental assessments."

Although at this time it is difficult to predict the full extent of the effects of the spill, the Red Deer River watershed is a major provincial watershed, supplying clean water to downstream communities across the prairies. Recent heavy rainfall and record alpine snow packs have led to extremely high water levels in the Red Deer River, which may complicate containment and clean up efforts. Jackson Creek is also home to the provincially threatened bull trout, Alberta's provincial fish.

For more information:

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