

A Spill is Worth a Thousand Words

We all know the common mantra, repeated by school teachers of all grade levels in defense of the “boring” history lessons students must endure: “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it” (George Santayana). So when we hear that, yet again, a pipeline spill has resulted in very serious damage to one of our most important provincial rivers, perhaps it is time to recall those words, cliché or not.

On June 8, 2012, north of Sundre, Alberta a pipeline operated by Plains Midstream Canada (a subsidiary of Plains All American Pipeline L.P.) spilled approximately 480,000 litres of light sour crude oil into the Red Deer River, a major source waterway for southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. This news came only weeks after reports of another pipeline leak, this time in northern Alberta. On May 19, a pipeline operated by Pace Oil & Gas Ltd. spilled approximately 800,000 litres of oil into surrounding peat wetlands just south of Rainbow Lake.

In the case of the Red Deer River Spill, the pipeline operator did not detect the problem themselves but was alerted to the leak by the Sundre Petroleum Operators Group (SPOG). Similarly, in the Rainbow Lake pipeline failure, the operator was informed their pipeline was leaking when another company operating in the area happened to notice it during a routine fly-over.

The condition of Alberta’s aging pipeline system, the sheer density of energy related pipelines crisscrossing the province, the rate at which this system is expanding, and perhaps most importantly, the overall weak regulatory oversight of the energy industry, are all disconcerting factors that undoubtedly contribute to the occurrence and severity of pipeline spills. In 2010 the Energy Resource Conservation Board, the entity responsible for provincial pipeline regulation, estimated that for every 1,000 km of pipeline, 1.7 failures occur per

year. As Alberta is currently crisscrossed by approximately 400,000 km of energy-related pipeline, this predicts 680 failures per year. As the regulators, government and industry representatives are quick to point out, some of these 680 failures result in small releases. Nonetheless, no matter the frequency or size of individual spills, the fact that a spill-free system is a lofty if not impossible goal, is indisputable.

AWA remains extremely concerned about the lack of rigorous, precautionary management and monitoring systems in place, and the cumulative impacts resulting from this weak regulation. Increasing national and international focus on major pipeline project proposals has fuelled mounting public concern regarding pipeline integrity. Large-scale disasters, such as the Red Deer River spill, indicate the province is not doing enough to ensure that the environmental and public health risks posed by energy development and the cumulative impacts of active and abandoned energy infrastructure across the province are being adequately managed. It is clear that current management and monitoring standards are able to safeguard neither the integrity of valuable ecosystems, nor the health and safety of Albertans.

- Madeline Wilson