

An underground issue

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Wilsonville resident raises awareness of high pressure petroleum pipeline

Every day, more than 1.5 million gallons of highly pressurized — and highly flammable — fuel surges beneath the track and sports field at Inza R. Wood middle school.

Buried at a depth of around four feet, the Santa Fe Pacific Pipeline crosses the parking lot to the east of the school, skirts the infield of the north baseball diamond, and cuts across the track before making a sudden jag to the south. It carries refined petroleum products, including gasoline, diesel, ethanol and jet fuel , around 115 miles from Portland to Eugene.

Shawn O’Neil, an attorney who moved to Wilsonville in 2008, has made it his goal to learn as much about the pipeline as possible. Now he is working to raise awareness, by publishing his findings to his website shawnoneil.com, about something he sees as an aspect of the community that receives too little attention.

O’Neil became concerned about the pipeline not long after moving to Wilsonville with his wife. The couple was planning ahead for a third family member to join them. “We moved here because of the schools,” said O’Neil.

After his son was born, O’Neil began to notice signs and markings around his neighborhood that hinted at the pipeline beneath his feet. The federal government requires that pipeline owners use signs and markings to indicate where a pipeline is — although they do not have specific requirements with respect to how frequent these notices must be.

“Thing start changing when you have kids,” O’Neil said. “You look at things totally differently. I noticed the pipeline. It made me concerned.”

O’Neil found that the pipeline belongs to Texas-based corporation Kinder Morgan Energy Partners. In Wilsonville, the pipeline runs through several densely-populated areas, including Villebois — home to Lowrie Primary School — and the neighborhoods surrounding Willamette Way East.

That wasn’t always the case. The pipeline was laid by a company called Southern Pacific Pipeline in 1962. At that time, the city of Wilsonville was still an unincorporated agricultural community of fewer than 1,000 residents who primarily made a living in growing hazelnuts and wheat. Back then, the pipeline passed mostly through fields and undeveloped land on its way south.

Now, Wilsonville has mushroomed to a city of over 20,000 residents. Development has continued apace, and as the city has worked to make the most of available land, it has played host to a growing number of developments and schools. Some of these newly-constructed areas were built above or adjacent to the pipeline.

Regulation

The pipeline remains under the control of Kinder Morgan.

“The City doesn’t really have local jurisdiction,” said Delora Kerber, the city’s public works director.

Municipalities frequently have little to no authority over a pipeline that passes through its limits. Nor do school districts — including the West Linn-Wilsonville School District, which did not respond to requests for comment on the Santa Fe pipeline.

Neither does the state assume any responsibility for the pipeline. According to the Pipeline Safety Trust, an



SPOKESMAN PHOTO: JAKE BARTMAN - A sign near the intersection of Barber Street and Costa Court marks the location of the Santa Fe Pacific Pipeline.

organization which advocates for pipeline awareness and government oversight, states can choose from different levels of involvement with pipeline regulation. Oregon has the “certification” ranking with regard to intrastate natural gas pipelines, which gives the state direct authority to enforce pipeline regulations.

But Oregon has no involvement whatsoever with regulating hazardous liquid pipelines — like the Santa Fe Pacific — whether those pipelines are intrastate or interstate. That is in sharp contrast with the state of Washington, which has the greatest possible measure of authority to regulate its hazardous liquid pipelines.

Liquid pipelines in Oregon are instead regulated by a subsidiary of the United States Department of Transportation called the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). PHMSA has a regional office in Colorado, from which it regulates all pipelines in the northwestern United States. The agency did not respond to requests for comment on its oversight of the Santa Fe pipeline.

Kerber says that she feels Kinder Morgan is attentive to the pipeline. “They have line riders and they have to report back to federal division,” she said.

Whether the company’s oversight is amply enforced by PHMSA is a matter of debate. Melissa Ruiz, a spokeswoman for Kinder Morgan, said that the government is heavily involved in ensuring pipeline safety.

“People should never say that the pipeline industry isn’t heavily regulated,” Ruiz said. “We have to raise our hands and ask for permission to do anything.”

She said that the company works hard to ensure that its 82,000 miles of pipeline are safe and well-maintained.

“Each year, we invest millions of dollars on integrity management and maintenance programs for our facilities and pipelines,” she said. In addition to using “smart pigs” — devices that can be placed in the pipeline to examine its internal condition — Ruiz says that the company also regularly digs around the pipeline to conduct visual inspections.

“We understand the concerns and we don’t take them lightly at all,” she said. “We live in these communities, too.” She detailed the public outreach efforts that Kinder Morgan makes, which, she said, included contact with Lowrie Primary School and “public awareness visits” featuring pipeline safety discussions to Wood Middle school. And she confirmed that Kinder Morgan had been in contact with the City of Wilsonville to discuss emergency information, public awareness and pipeline safety within the last year.

Ruiz stressed that the pipeline is the safest method of transporting large volumes of fossil fuels — rather than, for example, shuttling fuel up and down I-5 via a cavalcade of tanker trucks. A 1999 article in the Eugene Register-Guard about the Santa Fe Pipeline reported that it would take around 160 tanker trucks per day to move the volume of fuel carried by the pipeline.

“Ninety-nine point nine-nine percent of the time, products reach their destination safely (via pipeline),” Ruiz said.

But what if it doesn’t?

Infrequent though pipeline leaks may be, the effects of an accident can be enormous. Fumes from a 1999 leak in a pipeline operated by Olympic Pipeline Company caused a young man to drown in Whatcom Creek. The fumes were then ignited by two boys playing with a lighter near the scene, leaving the children dead. The cause of the leak was allegedly an improperly configured pressure relief valve.

Several months later, a track hoe operator ruptured the Santa Fe Pipeline at Tonquin Road in Sherwood, causing a 30 foot jet of gasoline to spray from the pipeline. Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue were the first to arrive on the scene, and by contacting Kinder Morgan — whose west coast operations are run from Orange County, California — and it was able to have the pipeline shut off.

Deputy Chief Dustin Morrow of TVF&R said the district’s firefighters are trained in responding to pipeline leaks from their earliest training.

“We start our process with folks in the recruit academy,” Morrow said. He added that the district conducts ongoing training exercises in pipeline disaster response at all levels of the organization. The district also has a Hazardous Materials Team which is specially trained to help contain leaks.

“Our main priority is to prevent ignition (of the fuel),” Morrow said. “If it is a fire environment and not just a spill environment, then the game changes pretty substantially.”

Morrow said that if the fuel were ignited, the agency would only be able to address fire started by the burning fuel — not the burning fuel itself. They would instead be forced to wait until Kinder Morgan shut off the flow of fuel.

Morrow said that his team has had little interaction with Kinder Morgan, and has heard from them only once or twice in the last 15 years. He said that he wishes the district had more contact with the company.

“If I had my way, I’d be drilling with them once or twice a year,” Morrow said. But he emphasized that because of the extensive training the district’s firefighters receive in handling pipeline spills, he feels confident that responders would

be able to handle the situation appropriately.

Morrow acknowledged that natural disasters pose a special threat. "If we do have an earthquake, that pipeline is going to be substantially disrupted," he said.

In general, Morrow said, as long as people are sure to telephone 811 before doing any sort of digging, the pipeline shouldn't pose much of a risk. "I think it's important for people to understand that overall, it's safe," Morrow said.

For his part, Shawn O'Neil insists that what is of crucial importance is that Wilsonville residents be aware of the pipeline's existence, and pay attention to what is being done to ensure its safety.

"The goal for me is contributing to my community, community awareness and protecting my family," O'Neil said. "I love my community, and I want it to be a better place."

Corrections were made to this story on Sept. 2, 2015.

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2 Comments

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helpful155 • 4 days ago

I hope this is not another case of someone, and a whole population of people, who move somewhere without researching about things like this and then want to change things like they are the only ones who matters. How can we have our way of life when people want to do away with it any way they can. I used to live 20 miles south of Wilsonville and remember as a kid playing in the deep trench through our farm when this was put in. How about the complainers pay for some new refineries and whatever else is needed so we can stop using the pipeline? Oh, I forgot there are always people that don't want anything like that near them either. I guess I could just ask them to stop driving their SUV and consuming anything that relies on petroleum products. I'm sure they would be understanding on this. I hope this is just concern to make sure this is safe and not make a living off of dealing with it.

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Wilsonville Resident → helpful155 • 4 days ago

If you read the article more carefully, you can see that the focus of this man's inquiries has been on the safety measures regarding the pipeline and promoting community awareness. As a parent, I can understand where he is coming from. Nowhere does the article say that this man objects to the existence of the pipeline.

As a Wilsonville resident, I appreciated being informed about the pipeline. I also took a look at the research that he collected about the pipeline on his web site and it does provide additional helpful information.

When the pipeline was installed years ago, Wilsonville wasn't densely populated as it is now. Whatever concerns that may arise now were not concerns back then.

Our community reflects those who have been here for a while as well as those who have recently arrived. Everyone's opinions and concerns should matter equally.

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