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Federal inspectors find pipelines in Montana, Wyoming at risk of failure along river crossings

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HELENA, Mont. — Federal safety regulators disclosed problems Tuesday with oil and other hazardous liquid pipelines at seven major river crossings and hundreds of smaller crossings in Montana and northern Wyoming — problems that could put the lines at increased risk of failure.

Problems found at the major river crossings must be fixed by spring or the companies that own them will face enforcement actions, said Chris Hoidal with the U.S. Department of Transportation.

That includes pipelines crossing the Missouri, Musselshell, Gallatin, Tongue and other rivers that are owned by three companies: Exxon Mobil, CHS and ConocoPhillips.

Some repairs already are under way, according to company representatives.

Many of the pipelines were installed decades ago in shallow trenches just a few feet beneath riverbottoms. Erosion caused in part by record flooding has since exposed the lines or left them buried under minimal cover. The consequences of a line failing was highlighted by an Exxon Mobil pipeline break in July that spilled 1,000 barrels of crude into the Yellowstone River, fouling dozens of miles of riverbank.

“They’ve got to do something. If they can’t fix them, then they will have to shut them down,” said Hoidal, who oversees pipeline safety in 12 Western states for the Transportation Department’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

He characterized the problems at the major crossings as putting them at a significant risk of failure. Information on the smaller crossings still is under analysis, and Hoidal said repairs to those would be scheduled on a case-by-case basis.

Hoidal said he has instructed his inspectors to take a similar look at pipelines elsewhere in the West. But the most detailed information has been collected since the Yellowstone spill for Montana and portions of northern Wyoming within the Missouri River basin.

More than 170,000 miles of pipelines carrying oil, refined petroleum and other hazardous liquids crisscross the United States, crossing some 35,000 streams, rivers and other water bodies, according to the Department of Transportation.

That includes 2,800 miles of pipelines in Montana, said industry consultant Bruce Beighle with Integrity Solutions in Clinton.

About half of that mileage includes lines operated by ConocoPhillips. Other companies with significant hazardous liquid pipeline mileage in Montana include CHS, Kinder Morgan, Marathon, True, Plains and Exxon Mobil.

Work already has been completed on an eighth major river crossing with problems, ConocoPhillips' Glacier pipeline along Belt Creek in central Montana. Two other ConocoPhillips pipelines not counted among the major crossings also have been repaired, said company spokeswoman Romelia Hinojosa.

Other upgrades are planned in the next several months. That includes \$15 million in additional work along Exxon Mobil's Silvertip line, according to information obtained from Hoidal's agency.

A 1,700-foot section of Silvertip was buried approximately 70 feet beneath the Yellowstone in September. Sections crossing Rock Creek and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone are due to be replaced by late January.

An industry representative said pipeline companies have been closely examining their lines since the summer flooding and are anxious to avoid a repeat of the Silvertip break, which costs Exxon an estimated \$135 million for cleanup and repair work.

"The incentive for us is these spills cost a lot of money," said Dave Galt, executive director of the Montana Petroleum Association. "All of these are being addressed and the companies take that responsibility. We don't want releases into the water."

Federal inspectors worked with state officials and the pipeline companies to survey the crossings. Initial results were delivered Tuesday to Montana's Oil Pipeline Safety Review Council, established by Gov. Brian Schweitzer in response to the Yellowstone spill.

"As long as those get fixed before the next high water, I'll feel a lot better about it," said council chairman Richard Opper, director of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

The three-member council will meet again in February. Attention will turn next to gaps in regulations governing the pipeline industry, Opper said.

Heightened public awareness since the Yellowstone River spill also will help prevent future pipeline failures, Opper added.

As an example, he said that over the summer a student at Carroll College in Helena found an exposed section of a gasoline pipeline crossing a creek near the community of York. The student reported the problem to officials, Opper said, and ConocoPhillips has since fixed the line.

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