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Investigation finds more problem oil pipelines crossing Montana Rivers

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PHMSA Regional Director Chris Hoidal gives a presentation to the Montana Oil Pipeline Safety Review Council

State officials Tuesday heard the results of a federal inspection into Montana's oil pipeline river crossings. The inspection finds safety concerns on waterways across the state.

Governor Brian Schweitzer established the Montana Oil Pipeline Safety Review Council following an Exxon Mobil oil spill on the Yellowstone river this Summer.

There are over 80 oil pipeline river crossings in the state, pipelines from various oil companies. Usually these pipes are buried beneath river beds, but not always very deep.

The Silvertip pipeline that ruptured this Summer dumped more than 40,000 gallons of oil into the Yellowstone river. It broke after spring flooding scoured the river bottom and exposed the line. Another broken pipe spilled

about 800 gallons into a ravine on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in June.

The Directors from three state agencies sit on the new Montana Oil Pipeline Safety Review Council, Montana Department of Transportation Director Tim Reardon, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Director Mary Sexton, and Department of Environmental Quality Director Richard Opper.

DEQ Director Opper said recent investigations have more pipeline hazards.

“So our Federal partners have done a lot of good work here and they have identified some problem areas that need to be addressed,” Opper said.

The federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, or ‘PHMSA’ found deteriorating or exposed pipes on waterways ranging from the Clark Fork, Jefferson and Musselshell rivers to smaller streams like Rock Creek and Belt Creek.

Regional PHMSA Director Chris Hoidal says serious exposures on the Missouri and Gallatin Rivers were found within just the last week or so and they need to be fixed.

“The key thing is these results are coming in right now, and we gotta move quickly. If they’re gonna get in there they gotta get in there right now by January or February in order to beat the Spring runoff,” Hoidal said.

“It’s not a question of feasibility, they will fix them, the companies will fix these crossings, they have to fix them,” Opper said.

For one, PHMSA can force oil companies to fix the lines through replacing them, rerouting them or reburying them deeper.

But Opper says the companies now know how expensive a ruptured pipe can be.

Latest estimates say Exxon Mobil spent \$135 million dollars on the Yellowstone Spill.

“None of the companies want to have to go through that,” Opper said. “I think they realize they’re far better off to take some significant steps now to ensure that that doesn’t happen to them.”

Many of the exposures should be fixed by next year. Opper said last Summer’s spill not only raised government awareness about pipelines, but the public’s too.

“If somebody sees an exposed pipeline now across a little creek or a major river, they’re more likely to let somebody know,” Opper said.

Carrol College student noticed an exposed line at Beaver Creek in Lewis and Clark County and called authorities—it resulted in a line replacement.

Here are some photos of a couple of the exposed oil lines, some recently fixed:

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Conoco Phillips Glacier Pipeline at Belt Creek (Remediated)



Conoco Phillips Seminole Pipeline at Beauvais Creek (Remediated)

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