

Understanding Pollution: Leaking Facts about Leaking Oil Pipelines

Recently, there has been a great deal of attention paid in the media to oil pipelines, most specifically the Keystone XL Pipeline which is a pipeline that, if built, will travel from Canada's tar sand fields all the way across the United States to the Gulf of Texas.ⁱ Oil pipelines crisscross the United States, and truthfully, most other countries. Oil is the preferred fuel, and energy source of the world in our time. Most of the pipelines are not visible. They're underground so that people don't see them, and they're out of the way. Why? Because oil pipelines have a few problems. The biggest is: They can burst.



Pipelines are a fast way of transporting massive amounts of oil and natural gas from one place to another, and they are constructed underground so that they are not seen by us every day. There is another thing that is being hidden from us, and that is the number of pipelines that are leaking or rupturing. In 2012 and 2013 in North Dakota there were close to 300 oil pipelines incidents that occurred, and were not reported to the public by the state government.ⁱⁱ The effects of oil spills are difficult enough to deal with when people know, and are able to help clean up. The fact that the state government is covering up the spills just exacerbates the problem. Oil pipelines cause the soil that they lie in to erode, and also contaminate the soil making it difficult, if not impossible, for plant life to grow let alone flourish there.ⁱⁱⁱ Then there is the risk that any spill or leak can have on ground water, which quenches the thirst of both human and animal alike.^{iv} In 2010 a pipeline

ruptured and spilled over 800,000 gallons of tar sands into the Kalamazoo River.^v That was four years ago, and in some parts of the river it is still possible to pull up clumps of oil from the bottom of the river.^{vi} Think about that for one moment. An oil pipeline ruptured four years ago, and there is still oil in the river. Would you want to drink that water? I wouldn't. Already, the cleanup has cost almost \$1 billion, and it is still on going.^{vii} Think of what could have been done to help the economy with an additional 1 billion dollar investment, and then consider that instead that money is being spent trying to clean up one giant mess.

When another pipeline burst near Salt Lake City and dumped over 30000 gallons into a river one morning in 2010, the fumes had such an effect on the residents of the town who breathed the fumes in their sleep that they did not wake up until almost noon.^{viii} Residents of every town that has been exposed to oil from broken pipelines complain of nausea, headaches, and difficulty breathing.^{ix} Something that is truly disconcerting is that there are no federal guidelines as to whether towns should be evacuated for health reasons related to oil spills which leads to some towns evacuated, and some sitting in oil literally!^x What is truly worrying is that recently an oil pipeline company claimed that there were positive effects of pipelines such as money brought into the local economy due to the cleanup.^{xi} Now, I'm all for helping the economy, but do we really want to rely on disasters to be our boost?



Oil pipelines bring in a massive amount of money and capital into the economy. In 2013 oil pipeline operator companies earned almost \$7 billion in revenue.^{xii} No one can deny that that is money that will benefit the United States as we seek to gain energy independence. However, we must consider the costs that we pay in order to earn such a large economic benefit. The first thing to consider is what is known as Eminent Domain. This is the ability that the government has to seize private property in order to build structures for the public good, or to allow private enterprise to build, and the only requirements private enterprise faces in seizing that land is that it must appear to be for the greater good of the public as a whole, and “fair” compensation must be paid to the landowner.^{xiii} As you can imagine, this is a bit of a controversial issue. No one wants to be told that they must give up their property, especially if that property has been in the family for generations. Going back to oil pipelines, what truly concerns me is that foreign corporations can exercise eminent domain as well. The Keystone XL pipeline is meeting fierce resistance from many landowners whose land the proposed pipeline will cross. Many are left without recourse except to go to court to try and defend their property rights, and sadly, they are losing.^{xiv}

Ultimately, oil pipelines will remain a serious topic of debate for years to come unless a serious shift is made into renewable or alternate energy. That means that we will continue to deal with pipelines bursting, and possibly not being told about it, water and soil being contaminated, and our health being affected just to keep the oil flowing. There is a saying in Frank Herbert’s book *Dune*: “The spice must flow.” Spice was the lifeblood of the interstellar economy in *Dune*, and we have allowed oil to take that place in our world. Allowed being the key word in the previous sentence. We actually do have a choice in how we acquire our energy. Other options are wind, solar, and water generated power. It is just that many people do not wish to take the time to let our governments know that we must to preserve the world in which we live, and find alternatives to oil which has such harmful effects.

About the Author



Dominick Principe is a graduate of Rowan University with dual Bachelor Degrees in Elementary Education and Writing Arts. He is a prolific reader who devours any book put before him, and feels that life is one great long book without an end. He fills his hours constantly exploring new information, and seeking to educate himself in the ways of the world. He puts all of that knowledge and his passion for learning to good use teaching English as a second language to students of all ages. When his nose isn’t buried in a book, or in class teaching, then he can generally be found typing away at his computer working on some random piece of writing that he was inspired to do.

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