

Rep. Jim Matheson - Questions for the Record
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment Hearing
Pipeline Safety Oversight and Legislation
September 23, 2010

Questions for Administrator Cynthia Quarterman, PHMSA

I request that you respond to the following questions, which relate to the June 11, 2010 oil leak in a pipeline in Salt Lake City, Utah, which is owned by the Chevron Pipe Line Company. The spill resulted in approximately 33,000 gallons of oil being spilled from the broken pipeline into the Red Butte Creek in northern Salt Lake City. While the investigation is still underway by PHMSA, the following questions are among the most important that have been raised by affected residents and businesses.

1. Currently, the purported cause of the Salt Lake spill is that a branch fell during a heavy windstorm, created an electric arc, which hit a metal fencepost that was driven to the ground just inches from the pipeline. When the electricity arced through that fencepost, it burned a hole in the pipeline. While this appears to be a very unusual accident, do you believe that industry inspections of pipelines are thorough enough to note what other potential hazards, like this fencepost, are surrounding their pipelines? How effective would more frequent patrolling (weekly, biweekly) be in helping prevent or eliminate risks?
2. In the Salt Lake spill, it appears that the monitoring equipment on the pipeline failed to indicate there was a leak for several hours after the hole was created, and the first time Chevron was aware of the leak was when the Salt Lake City Fire Department called them the next day. How effective are current monitoring systems for safety and immediate leak notification? Are best available monitoring and pipeline shut off technologies required to be used by industry? If not, why not?
3. Do you believe the current fine(s) for pipeline safety violations are high enough to ensure industry takes pipeline safety precautions seriously? If not, what level of fines can be imposed on pipeline operators that would so severely impact them that they would work extremely hard to prevent another spill?
4. A large portion of pipelines in this country were built over fifty years ago. What is the lifecycle of a hazardous materials pipeline? How frequently are aging pipelines phased out or required to be upgraded/replaced?

5. Given that many oil and gas pipelines run through highly populated areas, is it feasible to require these pipelines to be relocated? If not, what technologies exist to upgrade the pipelines to safeguard these urban environments?

6. Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, and the western U.S are all situated in high seismic areas. What is being done with regulations and safety assessments to address the safety risks to human populations and drinking water because pipelines are allowed to be located in fault areas? Does PHMSA require pipeline integrity management plans to take geographical considerations, like proximity to fault lines, into account?