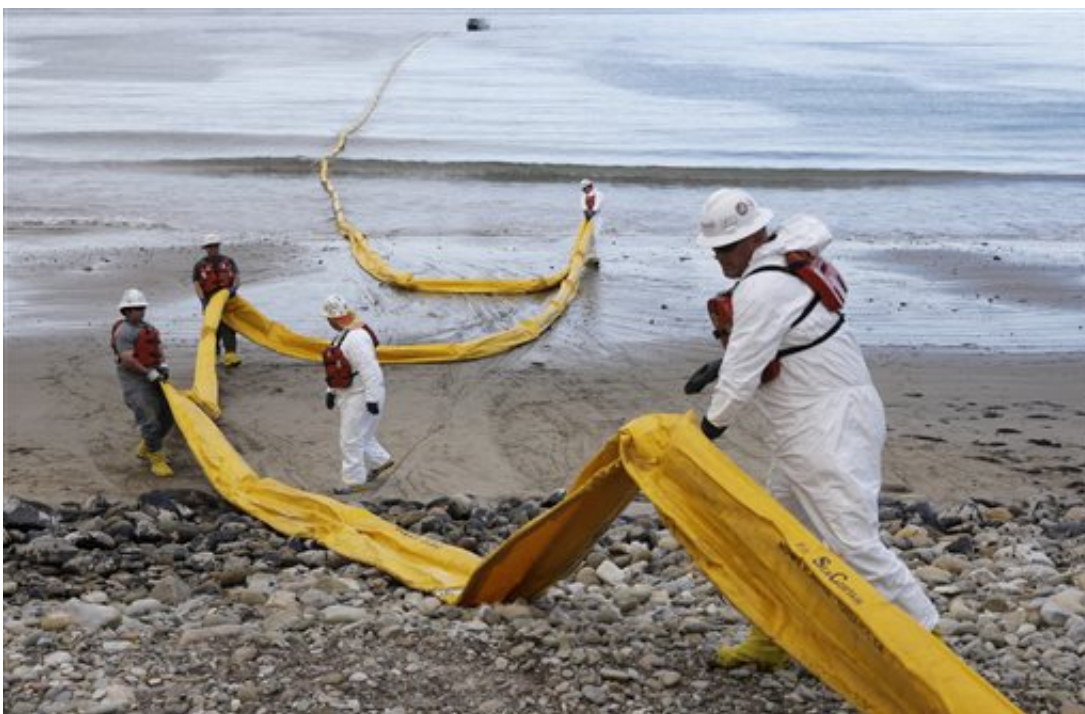


Finding cause of California oil spill could take months

May 22 2015, by Brian Melley



Workers prepare an oil containment boom at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across about 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The operator of an oil pipeline that broke and spilled thousands of gallons of crude across a scenic California shoreline says it could take weeks or even months before investigators find what caused the disaster.

Bad weather slowed cleanup efforts early Friday at the spill site in Santa Barbara County, where gusty winds whipped up waves as high as 4 feet, the National Weather Service said. Several days of calm seas had helped crews, but oil skimming vessels were brought in late Thursday, Santa Barbara news station KEYT-TV reported.

An estimated 105,000 gallons of crude spilled Tuesday, and about 21,000 gallons is believed to have made it to the sea and split into slicks that stretched 9 miles along the coast. As of Thursday, more than 9,000 gallons had been raked, skimmed and vacuumed up, officials said.

The thick, powerful-smelling crude covered rocks and sand, and six oil-coated pelicans and one juvenile sea lion had been rescued.

Crews have yet to excavate the broken piece of pipeline, which under the law must be done in the presence of federal regulators and a third party, officials with Plains All American Pipeline LP said at a Thursday news conference.

"We have not even uncovered the pipe yet," said Patrick Hodgins, the company's senior director of safety.

The company would not yet say whether part of the cause was two malfunctions that occurred shortly before the spill was discovered.

"We were having some pump problems on the pipeline," said Rick McMichael, another Plains All American representative. "Whether it led to the leak or not is part of our investigation."



A boat pulls a boom to collect oil near Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The 24-inch pipe, built in 1987, had no previous problems and was thoroughly inspected in 2012, according to the company. The pipe underwent similar tests about two weeks ago, though the results had not been analyzed yet.

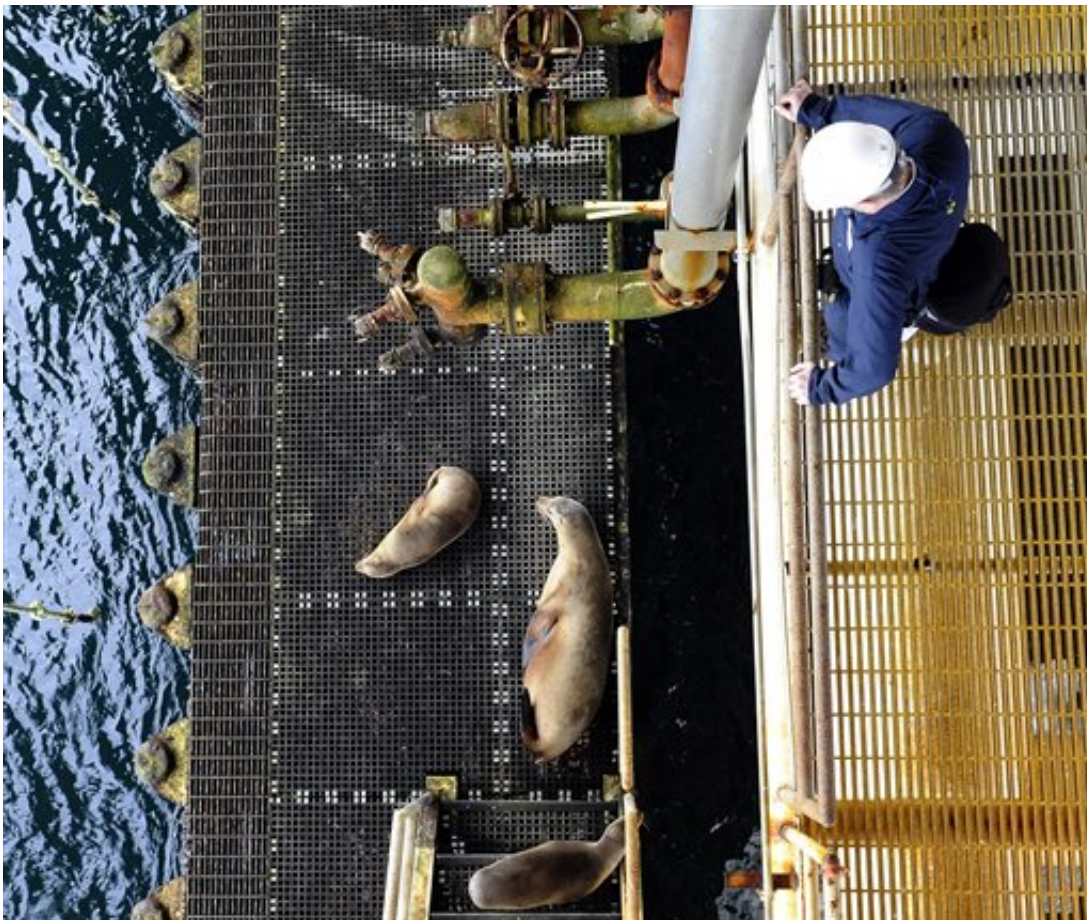
After the spill, which closed a 23-by-7-mile area to fishing, many volunteers offered to help sop up oil and clean off animals, but they were being turned away and encouraged not to act on their own.

"We just don't have enough positions," U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Jennifer Williams said.

The latest spill is a drop in the bucket compared with a catastrophic blowout on the same stretch of coast in 1969, when a Union Oil platform blew out and spewed an estimated 3 million gallons of crude along 30 miles of coast. Some 9,000 birds died, new regulations were passed and a new era of environmental activism began in the U.S.

Nevertheless, the new spill is being held up as another reason to oppose such things as fracking, the Keystone XL pipeline that would run from Canada to Texas, the moving of crude by train, and drilling in far-flung places.

"What we see from this event is that the industry still poses enormous risks to an area we cannot afford to lose," said Joel Reynolds of the Natural Resources Defense Council.



This May 1, 2009 file photo shows a Venoco staff member watches sleeping sea lions on the lower deck of offshore oil drilling platform 'Gail' operated by Venoco, Inc. off the coast of California near Santa Barbara, Calif. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said on Thursday, May 21, 2015. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson,File)

Plains All American and its subsidiaries operate more than 6,000 miles of hazardous liquid pipelines in at least 20 states, according to company reports. Those companies handle more than 4 million barrels of crude and other liquid fuels daily.

Since 2006, the companies have reported 199 accidents and been subject to 22 enforcement actions by federal regulators. The accidents resulted in a combined 725,500 gallons of hazardous liquids spilled and damage topping \$25 million.

Corrosion was determined to be the cause in more than 80 of those accidents. Failures in materials, welds and other equipment were cited more than 70 times.



This July 9, 2007 file photo shows a sea lion rests as water drains through the mussels at the water line of the Plains Exploration & Production Co. Platform Harvest drilling rig in the Santa Barbara Channel off the California coast. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said on Thursday, May 21, 2015. (Bryan Walton/The Santa Maria Times via AP)

Enforcement cases against the companies resulted in the collection of \$154,000 in penalties, according to a federal database.

Hodgins, of Plains All American, said the company has spent more than \$1.3 billion since 2007 on maintenance, repair and enhancement of its equipment.

He also defended the company's safety record, saying accidental releases have decreased as the number of miles of pipelines has increased.



This May 13, 2010 file photo Pelicans float on the water as an oil platform sits in the background off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said on Thursday, May 21, 2015. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill,File)



In this April 11, 1969, file photo, a Grebe is seen on a beach in Santa Barbara, Calif. An oil slick stretched across 9 miles of coastal waters Thursday, May 21, 2015, after a pipeline rupture spilled thousands of gallons of crude just north of Santa Barbara, along the same stretch of coastline as the 1969 spill. (AP Photo/Wally Fong,File)



In this Feb. 6, 1969, file photo, state forestry conservation crews gather up oil-soaked straw on a beach in Santa Barbara, Calif. An oil slick stretched across 9 miles of coastal waters Thursday, May 21, 2015, after a pipeline rupture spilled thousands of gallons of crude just north of Santa Barbara, along the same stretch of coastline as the 1969 spill. (AP Photo/Wally Fong, File)



In this Feb. 7, 1969 file photo, workers collect oil-soaked straw from the beach at Santa Barbara Harbor, Calif., following a leak from an off-shore well that covered area beaches. An oil slick stretched across 9 miles of coastal waters Thursday, May 21, 2015, after a pipeline rupture spilled thousands of gallons of crude just north of Santa Barbara, along the same stretch of coastline as the 1969 spill. (AP Photo, FILE)



Clean up workers tie oil-contaminated sand bags at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the oil that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



A worker removes oil from the beach at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



David Ledig, a national monument manager from the Bureau of Land Management, takes pictures of rocks covered in oil at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



California mussels and a crab are covered in oil at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



A clean-up worker removes oil from the beach at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

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