

# Company charged in oil spill that fouled California beaches (Update)

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In this May 21, 2015, file photo, an oil-covered bird flaps its wings amid at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif. Plains All American Pipeline said in a statement Tuesday, May 17, 2016, that a California grand jury has indicted the company and one of its employees in connection with the pipeline break. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

A Texas pipeline company responsible for spilling more than 140,000 gallons of crude oil on the California coast last year was indicted on dozens of criminal charges in the disaster that closed popular beaches and killed sea lions and birds, prosecutors said Tuesday.

Plains All American Pipeline and one of its employees face 46 counts of state law violations in the May 19, 2015, spill that initially went undetected until oil began pouring onto a pristine beach on the Santa Barbara coastline and running into the ocean.

Initial investigations by federal regulators found the 2-foot-wide underground pipeline was severely corroded where it broke on land.

Plains was charged in Santa Barbara Superior Court with four felony counts of spilling oil in state waters and could face fines of up to \$2.8 million if convicted of all the charges, prosecutors said.

"The carelessness of Plains All American harmed hundreds of species and marine life off Refugio Beach," California Attorney General Kamala Harris said in a statement. "This conduct is criminal, and today's charges serve as a powerful reminder of the consequences that flow from jeopardizing the well-being of our ecosystems and public health."

Plains said in a statement that the spill was an accident and believes no criminal behavior occurred.

"We will demonstrate that the charges have no merit and represent an inappropriate attempt to criminalize an unfortunate accident," the company said.

The spill two weeks before Memorial Day weekend last year forced the state to close popular beaches as an oil plume spread nine miles into the Pacific Ocean. More than 220 birds, mostly pelicans, and nearly 140 marine mammals, mostly sea lions, were found dead in the aftermath, and tar balls from the spill drifted more than 100 miles away to Los Angeles beaches.



In this May 21, 2015, file photo, David Ledig, a national monument manager from the Bureau of Land Management, walks past rocks covered in oil at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif. Plains All American Pipeline said in a statement Tuesday, May 17, 2016, that a California grand jury has indicted the company and one of its employees in connection with the pipeline break. (AP Photo/Jae Hong, File)

The Houston-based company faces three dozen misdemeanor counts of harming wildlife.

The spill was a grim reminder of a much larger disaster in 1969 when an offshore oil rig blowout blackened Santa Barbara beaches, killed wildlife and created a backlash that helped give birth to the environmental movement.

The Plains rupture was the largest coastal oil spill since the BP's Deepwater Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico six years ago that killed 11 rig workers and spewed millions of gallons of crude. BP settled federal criminal charges by pleading guilty to 12 felony counts and two

misdemeanors and reached \$20 billion settlement with the Justice Department for environmental damages.

Plains could still face federal criminal charges for last year's spill. The Department of Transportation's pipeline enforcement agency is expected to release the results this spring of its year-long investigation into the disaster's cause.

Initial investigation results have pointed to a badly corroded pipeline that had undergone strength tests just weeks before the spill, but the results had not been analyzed before it broke. Preliminary reports also show that it took hours for Plains to recognize what happened and notify officials.

A Plains employee and the company were charged in the indictment with misdemeanor counts of failing to report the spill quickly enough to state emergency officials.

James Buchanan, 41, the company's environmental and regulatory compliance specialist, faces up to three years if convicted of all charges, prosecutors said.

The company and Buchanan are scheduled for arraignment June 6.

Plains said it had cooperated fully in the investigation, but Harris said at a news conference the company had been "far less than cooperative."

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