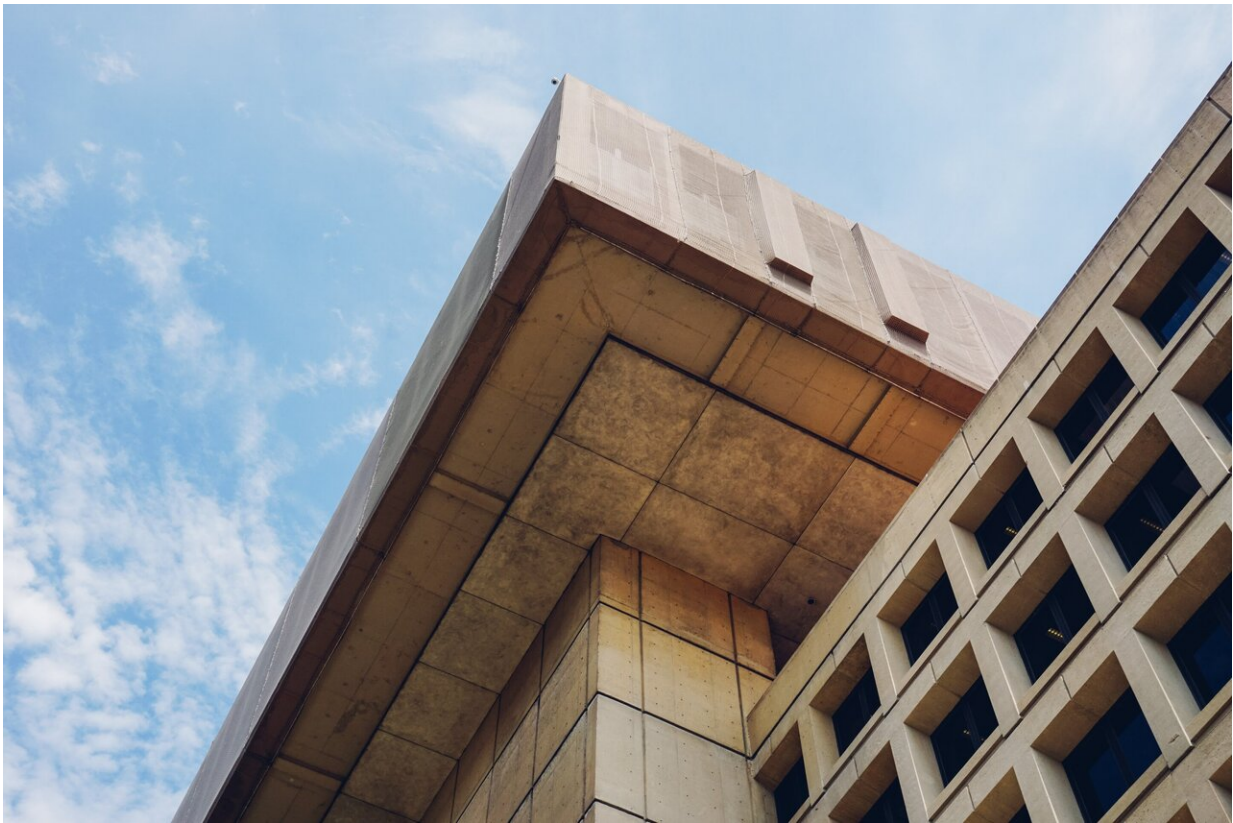


FBI joins investigation of Orange County oil spill

October 15 2021, by Richard Winton



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The FBI has joined the investigation into the oil spill that dumped thousands of gallons of crude off the coast of Orange County to determine whether any criminal violations occurred, the agency

announced Thursday.

The FBI joins a plethora of state and federal investigative agencies already examining the leak into the waters off Huntington Beach nearly two weeks ago. Officials initially estimated as much as 144,000 gallons of oil was spilled into the ocean but later revised that number to between 24,696 and 131,000 gallons.

Officials have not yet served any [search warrants](#) in connection with the investigation, Laura Eimiller, an FBI spokeswoman, said.

The U.S. Coast Guard's criminal investigative unit, the California attorney general's office and the Orange County district attorney's office are all already conducting a [criminal probe](#).

The FBI is now assisting with the criminal investigation, which among other things, is examining whether there was a negligent discharge of oil into navigable waters. An oil sheen was first spotted the evening of Oct. 2 by a vessel 4 1/2 miles off Huntington Beach and then detected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A federal agency that oversees pipelines has already initiated a probe and requested documentation from Amplify Energy, the parent company of Beta Offshore, which operates the [pipeline](#) linked to platforms off the coast.

But so far, no investigative agency has acknowledged serving search warrants or subpoenas on the oil company or any shipping company. At least two vessels that were near the pipeline on Oct. 2 have been boarded by Coast Guard investigators to determine whether they could have been involved. Both have since been cleared.

In addition, the Coast Guard began an investigation with assistance from

the National Transportation Safety Board. The agencies believe an anchor drag from a large vessel broke the pipe's concrete casing sometime in the last year and shifted the pipe more than 100 feet. The previous damage eventually caused a 13-inch crack to emerge in the pipeline.

Amplify Energy Chief Executive Martyn Willsher has been evasive about the crucial hours before the company formally reported finding oil in the water Oct. 3, offering information that conflicts with state and federal records and providing vague responses to questions at news conferences.

For Amplify, the first sign of trouble seems to have occurred at 2:30 a.m. Pacific time on Oct. 3, when control room employees received a low-pressure alarm on the 15-mile pipeline that funnels crude oil to land, according to a letter from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, which oversees oil pipelines. The pipeline was operating at about 30% of its maximum pressure, the agency said.

An Oct. 4 letter that instructed Amplify not to restart the San Pedro Bay pipeline until it was proved safe says that the alarm indicated "a possible failure" and that the operating company shut down the pipeline 3 1/2 hours later, at 6:01 a.m. The 2:30 alert also appears as an incident time on both federal and state reports from the company's risk management firm's call to federal authorities. Willsher has said the company first saw oil in the water at 8:09 a.m. Oct. 3 and reported it within the hour.

Darius Kirkwood, a spokesman for the federal pipeline oversight agency, said in a statement that the pipeline owner must keep the line closed until a comprehensive review of records is completed and a determination of whether deteriorating conditions exist elsewhere on the line is made.

In addition to the rig operator's actions, investigators are looking into

whether unprecedented gridlock at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach played a role in the spill.

The leak has escalated the national focus on the pandemic-induced logjam of cargo vessels outside the ports, which handle one-third of the nation's imports. leading President Joe Biden to broker a deal this week for the facilities to operate 24 hours a day.

Investigators are probing possible issues with the way ships are anchoring or drifting off the coast as they wait to dock.

The offshore traffic jams have forced ships to wait well beyond their usual times, dropping their enormous anchors near oil platforms and an undersea infrastructure of oil lines.

The Coast Guard and NTSB are focusing on a period early this year when heavy winds may have pushed large vessels over the pipeline. They are examining which vessels were in the vicinity on Jan. 24 and 25 and are gathering data on every vessel traveling near the pipeline since last October.

In the coming weeks, investigators expect to board several foreign ships that may have been anchored near the pipeline in the last year.

An initial ship strike may have moved the pipeline, which was last inspected in October 2020, without breaking it. Another collision, or possibly a geological event, could have either "increased the fracture or caused the whole thing," U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Jason Neubauer said.

The probes could lead to criminal charges and civil penalties and be used in several class-action lawsuits against Amplify Energy, legal experts say.

Investigators plan to remove the cracked section of the pipeline and

bring it to a lab so NTSB metallurgy experts can determine when it was damaged and when it began leaking.

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