

Crude oil spills into Caddo bayou, kills wildlife

Vickie Welborn, 10:13 p.m. CDT October 18, 2014



(Photo: Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times)

MOORINGSPOINT – A major crude oil spill discovered near here Monday that stopped just shy of Caddo Lake has already killed dozens of fish and some reptiles and will keep cleanup crews and regulatory agencies on site likely for months to come.

"I would call it a significant size spill," Bill Rhotenberry, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's federal on-scene coordinator said of the oil that leaked in a rural Caddo Parish bayou from a Mid-Valley Pipeline.

The pipeline's owner, Sunoco Logistics, roughly estimated 4,000 barrels of crude oil had flowed into Tete Bayou when control operators noticed a drop in pressure around 8 a.m. Monday. The line, stretching 1,000 miles from Longview, Texas, to major oil refineries in Ohio and Michigan, was shut down within 20 minutes, Sunoco

spokesman Jeff Shields said.

Shortly before noon, contractors searching from air and by foot tracked the source of the leak and began immediate efforts to stop it from getting into Caddo Lake. "That was a priority," Shields said.

No oil sheens have been detected on the lake, but it will be monitored by air and boat as the cleanup continues.

The spill area off Hereford Road, which dead ends at the lake, is sparsely inhabited where workers are concentrating their efforts. Evacuations were not ordered; however, three families voluntarily left. Sunoco is paying their expenses for the duration of the time they want to be away from their homes.

The company has approximately 250 contractors on scene mopping up the spilled crude. To work in the area, the contractors must wear flame retardant clothing, hard hats, safety goggles and respirators.



Workers clean up the 4,000 barrels of crude oil that spilled in Tete Bayou. Sunoco Logistics, operator of the Mid-Valley Pipeline, has responded with more than 250 personnel to the site to contain and recover the oil, which entered Tete Bayou but did not reach Caddo Lake. (Photo: Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times)

The pungent odor of oil fills the air closer to the work site. Air monitors are spaced throughout the heavily wooded area and readings are taken to make sure the volatile organic contaminants, or VOCs, do not reach a certain level to where it would cause a health risk. EPA is monitoring the air quality independent of Sunoco.

"The only risk of VOCs is in the immediate area of the oil," Rhotenberry said. "Out of the spill's pathway it's not as much of an issue." Readings have been low so far.

Shields estimates about 1,900 barrels of crude had been recovered from the bayou through Saturday. Neither he nor Rhotenberry could offer a timeline for full removal, other than said it will take months. A spill from the same pipeline in March in Cincinnati is still in the remediation phase.



An aerial shows the mouth of the Tete Bayou going into Caddo Lake. The oil spill was stopped several hundred yards upstream. Two rings of containment boom are placed at the mouth of the lake as a precaution. Contractors are patrolling by boat to monitor for any sign of an oil sheen. (Photo: Special to The Times)

Once the majority of the oil is removed then the focus will turn to remediation and restoration. Jeffrey Meyers, spill response specialist with the Louisiana Oil Spill Coordinator's Office, said the time-consuming task moving forward will be to locate the pockets of residual oil that can become trapped in the soil and even in crawfish holes.

"After we get the black up we'll be looking for the sheen," Meyers said.

Natural bacteria aids in eating the oil but it's not as effective in the fall and winter months. So the maintenance phase will include constant placement and exchange of oil-absorbing materials.

It will take a joint effort of Louisiana Natural Resource Damage Assessment, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the oil spill coordinator's office and the Louisiana Department of Environment Quality to keep an eye on the area long term.

Trees, vegetation and wildlife in a neighboring bayou will be used as a baseline to determine if Tete Bayou is showing any unusual signs of damage. Through Saturday, the spill has proven deadly to about 66 animals, Shields said, including 30 fish, crawfish and 10 reptiles. A wood duck was rescued and is in the hands of a wildlife specialist that will stay on scene to assist with animal rehabilitation needs.

Sunoco "understands its obligations well and understands it is liable for the cost," Shields said.

The U.S. Department of Transportation Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration regulates pipeline spills and will oversee the investigation into how the leak occurred and if any action will be taken against Sonoco. The line was built in 1949-50.

For the short term and long term Sonoco will have to mitigate, Meyers said. "Nobody is walking away from this so to speak."



Oil in Tete Bayou.(Photo: Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times)

Fortunately, the weather is cooperating. Heavy rains or warmer temperatures would only add to the cleanup woes by increasing the harmful vapors.

In the meantime, travel on Hereford Road has limited access as workers are moving around in ATVs, pickups and large trucks from the bridge to a staging area. Louisiana State Police Troop G spokesman Matt Harris also cautions hunters to stay away because of the number of people who are working in the woods.

"It's a safety concern, also because of their equipment," he said.

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