

Editorial: Pipeline spill near Caddo Lake was too close to disaster

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Oil pipelines get a great deal of criticism from environmental groups, but when it comes to moving crude they are certainly the safest and most efficient way to go.

Safest does not mean fool-proof, though.

Last week we had a near disaster when a Sunoco Logistics pipeline developed a leak, spilling about 4,000 barrels of crude into a bayou adjacent to Caddo Lake, on the Louisiana side.

At this writing it does not appear any of the oil will make it into the lake, but that is by no means a guarantee. It will take months to clean up the mess — 4,000 barrels is about 168,000 gallons — and a heavy rain could push the oil into Caddo. And because of the interesting patterns in Caddo's currents, the fact this spill occurred in Louisiana doesn't mean the oil couldn't make it to the more environmentally sensitive Texas side.

Fortunately, weather has been favorable since the pipeline break, short-range forecasts show good weather over the next week and the probability crude will make it to the lake lessens each day as cleanup continues. Some damage has occurred in the bayou, however. About 60 animals — mostly fish — have died and that number is likely to increase.

Sunoco is cooperating fully in getting the mess cleaned up. It's possible the company will face penalties, but environmental and transportation officials are rightly focused now on cleanup and repairs. The fact is there are only a few ways to get crude from field to refinery, and the other predominant method is by rail. Over the past year there have been plenty of reports of derailments and oil spills in that way, too.

Because there is no chance we are going to stop using oil within the foreseeable future, we have to do the best we can to keep the spills to a minimum. We are not suggesting Sunoco Logistics was in any way lax in this and it will certainly have to pay all the costs of the cleanup and remediation. Cleaning up is not nearly as important as prevention, though, and we hope the company is focused on that, too.

This is especially true around natural gems like Caddo Lake, which is irreplaceable. We are not calling for more government regulation, but suggesting the pipeline industry could shore up maintenance and best practices. Finding ways to keep pipelines away from such environmentally sensitive areas also would make sense.

We know leaks and spills are going to happen, even with the best oversight. All we can do is work together to keep damage to the absolute minimum.