

Texas' Only Natural Lake Is Polluted With Oil, and the EPA Isn't Paying Attention, Activists Say

By [Amy Silverstein](#) Tue., Nov. 4 2014 at 6:29 AM

Texas has exactly one good sized natural lake that we share with Louisiana, and it's totally not getting flooded with oil right now, officials have assured us these last few weeks. On October 13, workers noticed crude oil leaking out of a pipeline and into a Louisiana bayou. The pipeline operator estimated a loss of 4,000 barrels, making it one of the largest spills this year. But while the bayou feeds into the beloved Caddo Lake, the oil has supposedly been stopped in its tracks.

The spill was "immediately contained," a spokesman for the Louisiana State Police told the *Wall Street Journal* on October 14. The Environmental Protection Agency agreed. "The oil has not reached the lake. The oil is approximately four-tenths to five-tenths of a mile upstream," an EPA investigator told a local news station a few weeks back.

Those assurances were unconvincing to Tar Sands Blockade, that scrappy group of environmental activists who've been arrested for protesting the Keystone pipeline. Last week, two Tar Sands Blockade volunteers visited the Louisiana side of Caddo Lake and took a canoe close to where the spill had occurred. They took a video, posted above, of what looks like a sheen of oil on top of the water.

"The amount of oil that has reached Caddo Lake is hard for us to estimate, suffice it to say it's enough to burn the nostrils and cause headaches," they wrote in a report after the visit. "The stench was overwhelming at times, and the oil thick enough to coat the sides of our canoe."

The EPA maintains that whatever it is that the Tar Sands Blockade found, it's not oil. After hearing about Tar Sands report, the EPA's on-scene coordinator Nicolas Brescia even took a canoe back out there with response workers Monday morning, "just to double-check," EPA spokesperson Jennah Durant tells Unfair Park. "They didn't see anything that was of concern," Durant says.

Durant says the EPA didn't bother testing the water to confirm that no oil has reached Caddo Lake yet. "If you can't see it, then they're not observing anything that would lead them to do any testing," she says.

The Caddo Lake Institute, a nonprofit that protects the lake, had also sent an expert out on a boat. At the time, the expert couldn't find any evidence that the oil reached the lake. But Caddo Lake Institute President Richard Lowerre stresses that his organization did their inspection about a week before the Tar Sands Blockade visit, in the same spot where the blockaders took footage. Lowerre says Tar

Sands' video is inconclusive, though he's similarly concerned about the aging pipelines running through the area.

"You just can't tell from the video," he says. "So I'm hoping it's not oil from the spill, but I can't say it is or it isn't."

The pipeline is operated by Fort Worth-based Sunoco Logistics, and the company has said that the cause of the spill is "undetermined." This is the second time this year that Sunoco had to shut down a portion of its Mid-Valley pipeline because of an oil spill -- the last one was 240 barrels of crude in Ohio. And a law firm that represents landowners says that the pipeline in question has leaked a total of 40 times since 2006.

"It's almost always the case that later on, more oil is spilled than is first reported, the oil goes further than was first reported," says Ron Seifert, a Tar Sands spokesman.

Whether the shiny stuff on the water is in fact oil from the spill or just some rain water that got "washed in" (the EPA spokesperson's possible explanation), Seifert is at least onto something with the whole "more oil is spilled than is first reported" theory: Monday morning, Sunoco revised its spill numbers with an announcement that it actually leaked not 4,000 barrels, but 4,500. That's a healthy 21,000 gallon difference.

Sunoco Logistics spokesman Jeff Shields sent over an email statement Monday night that sticks with the EPA's version of events:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Sunoco Logistics today inspected absorbent booms that were placed in Caddo Lake as a protective measure against the spread of oil into the lake. Inspection of the booms by the EPA found that the absorbent material was stained naturally from lake water but there was no oil in, on or around the booms. These areas at the mouth of the lake have been regularly inspected since the Oct. 13 crude oil release from the Mid-Valley Pipeline into Tete Bayou, which feeds Caddo Lake. No oil has been detected in Caddo Lake by the Unified Command operation that has included U.S. EPA, Louisiana Oil Spill Coordinator's Office, Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana State Police and Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office.