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TC Energy Releases Cause of Dec. 7 Keystone Pipeline Oil Spill

The Pipeline Failed Due to Multiple Factors Including a Faulty Weld and "Bending Stress" on the Pipeline

BELLINGHAM, Washington [Feb. 9, 2023] – TC Energy has provided an update into the cause of their Dec. 7, 2022 Keystone Pipeline Oil Spill which shut down the pipeline after it dumped crude oil into a creek in Washington County, Kansas. Initial estimates put the spill at 14,000 barrels, or 588,000 gallons, of oil, TC Energy has since determined the actual spill amount to be 543,354 gallons. The operator lists the pipeline as failing due to "a combination of factors," such as stress on the pipe and a bad weld on the pipeline.

"It sounds to me like this is a case of interacting threats, a bad weld eventually broken by, most likely, land movement," Pipeline Safety Trust Executive Director Bill Caram said. "If it was land movement that caused the bending stress on the pipe, there is a provision in TC Energy's special permit that requires them to have a geohazard mitigation program, so they should have been mitigating against threats from land movement."

Caram added that the case of a faulty weld, particularly one from a fabrication facility is troubling. He said this only adds to the list of manufacturing and construction issues that have plagued the Keystone Pipeline, as pointed out by a 2021 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report.

Following two large spills in 2017 and 2019, lawmakers requested the GAO produce a report to find out why such large spills occurred. The GAO concluded that preventable construction issues contributed to Keystone Pipeline spills more frequently than other pipelines. It also determined that Keystone's largest spills were "caused by issues related to the original design, manufacturing of the pipe, or construction of the pipeline."

“It begs the question of how many other bad welds are on the Keystone Pipeline from this same fabrication facility,” Caram said. “How did TC Energy miss this flaw during initial and subsequent inspections?”

The operator stated they performed necessary welding inspections and tested the pipeline, but that the bad weld went unnoticed and led to “a crack that propagated over time as a result of bending stress fatigue.”

TC Energy has not specifically blamed land movement as the cause of the bending stress on the pipeline and the company has said that element remains under investigation.

“Operators and pipeline safety regulations have a long way to go in addressing interactive threats. Operators might find smaller cracks and decide they are not bad enough to repair, but another threat could exacerbate the risk that crack poses,” Caram said. “I believe we need to see operators address repairs more aggressively to account for the effects of interactive threats.”

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About Pipeline Safety Trust: The Pipeline Safety Trust is a nonprofit public watchdog promoting pipeline safety through education and advocacy by increasing access to information, and by building partnerships with residents, safety advocates, government and industry, that result in safer communities and a healthier environment.