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NTSB Releases Investigation Report and Safety Recommendations Following 2021 Huntington Beach, CA Oil Spill

In Jan. 2021, multiple anchors struck Beta Offshore’s San Pedro Bay Pipeline creating conditions that led to the release of 25,000 gallons of crude oil nine months later. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has released their investigation into the devastating incident and provided recommendations to improve pipeline safety moving forward.

BELLINGHAM, Washington [Jan. 31, 2024] – The Oct. 2021 spill fouled coastal habitat in Southern California and killed over 80 animals including dolphins, sea lions, and multiple species of birds. In May 2023, the federal pipeline regulator, Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) fined Beta Offshore, a subsidiary of Amplify Energy Corp., \$3.4 million, at the time the third-highest sought fine in the agency’s history.

Seven months after PHMSA announced the fine, the NTSB has concurred with PHMSA’s incident investigation and determined the operator was indeed responsible for a slew of different infractions that exacerbated the spill.

Following the spill, Beta Offshore employees ignored multiple leak detection alarms that alerted them to a problem with the San Pedro Bay Pipeline. In addition to ignoring the alarms, control room workers attempted to intentionally shut off the alarms by repeatedly opening and closing shipping pumps, without closing any of the pipeline’s valves, compounding the damage of the rupture on the coastal area.

Following the investigation, both PHMSA and NTSB discovered that Beta Offshore’s control room employees had not been properly trained in how to monitor their leak detection system.

The agency noted that the San Pedro Bay Pipeline's operations should have been halted at the sound of the first alarm. Pipeline controllers did not report the spill to federal authorities until 14 hours after it occurred.

In its investigation, NTSB further determined that the buildup of water in the San Pedro Bay Pipeline was a contributing factor in the controllers' inability to properly respond to the leak alarms.

Ultimately the integrity of the pipeline is the pipeline operator's responsibility. Beta Offshore should have identified and mitigated all potential threats against its San Pedro Bay Pipeline, including the risks from ship anchors.

"Amplify continuously hit the snooze button and ignored eight different leak alarms over the course of 14 hours while pumping oil into our treasured coastal waters," Pipeline Safety Trust (PST) Executive Director Bill Caram said.

To prevent similar incidents and improve pipeline safety, NTSB has suggested the following recommendations.

- The Coast Guard should create procedures that notify pipeline and utility operators following potential anchor strikes and other incursions on submerged pipelines
- Following the spill, NTSB noted that there was a lack of drug testing conducted for the pipeline controllers, the agency now recommends PHMSA audit Beta Offshore's drug-testing program
- To improve pipeline safety, NTSB has recommended that PHMSA publish an advisory bulletin that promotes the benefits of pipeline safety management systems and calls on all PHMSA-regulated pipeline owners and operators to create and carry out such systems based on guidance from the American Petroleum Institute (API) Recommended Practice 1173

"In addition to the NTSB's common-sense recommendations, we hope Congress addresses another obvious shortfall in the pipeline safety regulations by requiring off-shore pipelines to have a damage prevention program. There is no practical reason for off-shore pipelines to be specifically exempted from the damage prevention program requirement on-shore pipelines are required to employ," Caram added.

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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.

