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An Unregulated Phillips 66 Pipeline Exploded and Shot a Fireball 500ft into the Air

On Jan. 30, the natural gas pipeline ruptured in rural Beaver County, Oklahoma and sent a pillar of fire into the night air that could be seen from more than 80 miles away. Initial investigations point to the pipeline being an [unregulated gas gathering line](#), meaning there are no minimum federal safety regulations enforced by U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA).

BELLINGHAM, Washington [Feb. 2, 2024] – Local Oklahoma officials have said it was a stroke of luck the massive explosion did not lead to loss of life or destroy any structures. The incident, that occurred near the Oklahoma-Texas border, is the result of the failure of what is known as [“dead leg”](#) pipe, or a part of the pipeline that juts off the main pipeline, leads nowhere, and sees virtually no flow or movement but is still exposed to the product the pipeline transports. This dead leg pipe could have been an abandoned feeder pipe from an inactive production site.

Known to be highly susceptible to corrosion failure, most dead leg pipelines are cut off from the main pipe by an isolation valve. Given the size of the explosion, it is probable that Phillips’ 24-inch gathering pipeline was also involved in the failure, meaning it is likely this dead leg pipe was not isolated from the main pipeline.

Because dead leg pipe can experience a near-complete lack of flow, the product, which in the case of the Phillips 66 pipeline is natural gas, can pool at the bottom of the “inactive” pipe allowing liquid to form and making the threat of internal corrosion severe. According to PHMSA’s public database, more than half of gas gathering pipeline failures are due to corrosion. Gathering pipelines contain corrosive constituents yet to be processed, making them the most likely type of pipeline to fail due to corrosion.

“A prudent operator would either diligently monitor or remove dead leg pipes on their system and certainly would have isolated it from their active system,” Pipeline Safety Trust (PST) Executive Director Bill Caram said. “It is impossible to use smart pigs or other inline-inspection tools (ILI) to monitor dead legs for threats, making it harder to manage the integrity of the pipeline and contributing to their failure rate.”

An operator could retrofit their pipeline to remove dead legs and avoid their added risk of corrosion, but it would be at their own discretion. Currently, there is nothing in the federal pipeline safety regulations that either require operators to fix existing dead legs or build their new pipelines without them; despite the widespread knowledge that these types of pipes are prone to exceedingly-high levels of internal corrosion. And even if there were, the pipeline that exploded on Tuesday likely wouldn’t be subject to them.

In this case, the dead leg pipe also appears to be what is known as a “Type R gas gathering pipeline,” or a type of pipeline unregulated by the federal pipeline regulator, PHMSA. When it comes to Type R gas gathering pipelines, all an operator must do is submit annual and incident reports, and even this brand-new requirement came into effect only last year. Other than minimal reporting, there is nothing in the regulations that require an operator to do anything to a Type R gas gathering pipeline.

“As we see from this most recent harrowing failure, type R gas gathering pipelines need to be regulated by PHMSA,” Caram said. “These pipelines, just like other previously unregulated gathering lines, have the potential to be deadly and we’re fortunate this situation wasn’t much worse.”

Although last year’s rule brought roughly 100,000 miles of gas gathering lines under minimum regulations for the first time, over 250,000 miles of pipeline still operate without any regulated safety standards; type R lines (pipelines 8.625 inches or smaller in diameter) remain outside of federal oversight.

The pipeline industry has litigated federal rules on gas gathering line safety and attempted to exempt any pipeline 12 inches in diameter or less from regulation. In 2018, a [three-year-old girl was killed](#) when a 10-inch gathering line exploded 20-feet from her home.

“It’s clear that regardless of diameter these pipelines can be fatal,” Caram said. “We need to bring the rest of these hundreds of thousands of miles of pipeline under regulation to prevent future damage and needless loss of life.”

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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.