

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4402

June 16, 2010

ENERGY AND COMMERCE
COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEES:

HEALTH

ENERGY AND AIR QUALITY

COMMERCE, TRADE AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
COMMITTEE

The Honorable Ray LaHood
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary LaHood,

On Friday, June 11 an oil pipeline owned and operated by the Chevron Pipe Line Company began leaking in Salt Lake City and, before being shut off early Saturday morning, spilled approximately 33,000 gallons of oil in Red Butte Creek in northern Salt Lake City. This creek flows into the Jordan River, which is the main waterway that drains the Jordan River Watershed into the Great Salt Lake. It is my hope that the oil in the Jordan River will be contained and that no long term damage to the fragile ecosystem around the Great Salt Lake will occur. I am troubled by recent reports that oil sheen has been spotted in wetlands surrounding the Great Salt Lake.

While mitigating the environmental impacts of the spill is a top concern for me and my constituents, it is equally important that we learn exactly what caused this leak and what steps are required to ensure that another pipeline accident does not occur. I want to thank the inspectors from the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration for their prompt response and investigation into the cause of this spill. It is my understanding inspectors were quickly dispatched to Utah and Texas and were on the ground during excavation of the broken pipe on Sunday. I look forward to receiving the results of the metallurgical study of the pipe and hope this will provide answers on how this leak occurred.

While I am pleased with the rapid response of the federal investigators, I have several questions about the investigation moving forward and hope these questions will be answered before Chevron's "restart plan" is approved and the pipeline reopened.

- From what you currently know, did Chevron abide by pipeline safety regulations and has this section of pipeline been cited for violations in the past?
- Can you elaborate on the types of inspections that have been conducted on the pipeline, including what procedures and criteria were used in the inspections?
- What were the findings from the most recent inspection of the pipeline?
- Given the fact that Chevron failed to detect the leak in the pipe for at least eight hours after the failure, do you believe its pipeline monitoring system was functioning properly?

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- Right now the purported cause of the spill is that an electric arc hit a metal fencepost that was driven to the ground just inches from the pipeline. When the electricity arced through that fencepost, it burned a hole in the pipeline. It is very worrisome that a metal fencepost was allowed within inches of the pipeline. Why was the fence post erected so close to the pipeline? Are there other fence posts or electrical substations similarly situated to pipelines in other locations?
- Can you elaborate on the procedure for excavating the damaged pipe and whether that process could impede investigations into the cause of the failure?

Again, thank you for your Department's response to this spill in Utah. I strongly urge the DOT to complete their investigation as quickly and thoroughly as possible, and make all findings public. It is important we know if current regulations were followed and, if not, I look forward to working with you on whether additional measures need to be taken to prevent future disasters of this nature. Please continue to keep me informed on progress of the investigation.

Sincerely,



JIM MATHESON
Member of Congress