

Repair expense hinders safety of Gulf pipelines

HOUSTON (AP) — The National Transportation Safety Board heard Tuesday that recommendations to improve gas pipeline safety in the Gulf of Mexico were ignored because they would have been too expensive.

The testimony came on the final day of a two-day NTSB hearing into an Oct. 3 explosion that killed 11 crewmen on the Northumberland, a fishing boat that ruptured a pipeline in shallow Gulf waters near the Sabine Pass.

The NTSB Tuesday reviewed a 1987 memo from Robert Aubry, former head of the Southwest Region for the Office of Pipeline Safety, an agency in the Department of the Interior.

In the memo, Aubry suggested that pipeline operators be required to review lines in shallow water every three years, and re-bury lines that have become exposed.

His recommendations followed a July 24, 1987 accident on the boat Sea Chief that killed two near New Orleans.

But those recommendations were never implemented because it would have cost operators too much, Cesar DeLeon, assistant director for Pipeline Safety Regulation, told the NTSB Tuesday.

DeLeon read from a memo he wrote to Aubry in response.

"These changes would be a substantial cost in order to protect imprudent vessel operators with little benefit to the public," DeLeon said in the memo. "I believe the problem can be handled at less cost with buoy markers and

or unburied. He should take prudent action to avoid them."

Edward Swindell, vice president of operations for the Zapata Haynie Corp., owners of the Northumberland, asked DeLeon Tuesday why he did not read the final paragraph in his memo for the investigative panel.

DeLeon said he thought he had answered the question completely without reading the final paragraph.

After direction from Lee V. Dickinson, who is conducting the two-day hearing, DeLeon read his final paragraph.

"In addition, a pipeline without sufficient cover in shallow offshore waters are considered unsafe. The existing regulations... further require that the operators take appropriate, immediate action."

In other testimony Tuesday, Dan Bourgeois, Gulf of Mexico regional supervisor for the Minerals Management Service, said his agency does not inspect oil and gas pipelines to make sure they remain buried in the Gulf.

When asked how pipelines remain buried, Bourgeois said, "We don't know if that is actually occurring."

The pipeline struck by the Northumberland in nine to 11

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Pipeline Safety Regulation

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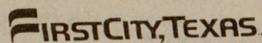
He told the NTSB hearing Tuesday that, "We viewed that as a navigational problem that a boat captain should assure himself of knowing where these pipelines are whether they're buried

feet of water was supposed to be buried three feet beneath the Gulf bottom, but was not, testimony has shown.

Bourgeois said there are 4,300 active oil and gas pipelines in the Gulf of which 2,467 fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Interior and 1,833 are the responsibility of the Department of Transportation, he said.

The interior department lines constitute 4,550 miles of pipe, while the DOT has 13,305 miles of pipe, he said.

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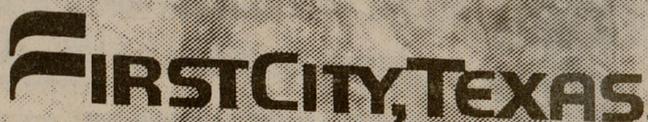
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