

Another Pig Problem on KUAC (FM) News, Thursday, Jan. 10, 2013

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By Dan Bross

Wax build up caused by low oil throughput is continuing to cause problems for Trans Alaska Pipeline operators. As KUAC's Dan Bross reports, the wax is at the heart of recent trouble with mechanical pigs used to clean the inside of the pipeline.

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Bross: Wax pushed by cleaning pigs can trigger pipeline valves at the wrong time fouling up operations Alyeska spokeswoman Michelle Egan says that's what happened last week as a pig pushed a large plug of wax, estimated to be several feet long, through Pump Station 9, south of Delta Junction.

Egan: The pig did not make it all the way thru the valves it was intended to. And so we stopped everything, took a step back to look at what are we gonna do about this large amount of wax. So we manually moved that pig through the station, um, fully without incident. But we knew we had this large wax cloud in front of it traveling down to Valdez, and so we sent a special pig tracking team with a tracking device down toward Valdez to monitor.

Bross: Egan says the pig was retrieved without trouble at Valdez Tuesday. A similar incident last spring resulted in a pig misrouting into pressure relief piping at Valdez, a threat to the important safety system. The wax-related problems are the result of reduced North Slope oil production. The slow flow allows the oil to cool on the 800-mile trip to Valdez and wax in the crude to accumulate on pipeline walls. Alyeska now runs cleaning pigs weekly and last month began recirculating oil through pump stations to up its temperature. Egan says the recirculation started during December's extreme cold snap and could have resulted in the large wax plug that caused this week's pig problem.

Egan: Adding that extra temperature could cause wax to precipitate off the side of the pipe wall. So it could have just been a combination of really cold temperatures and added heat, We don't know for sure.

Bross: Egan says Alyeska is looking at recirculating oil through an additional pump station to further increase the crude temperature and combat the wax accumulation. The wax and pigging problems were highlighted in a recent report by Fairbanks-based oil industry analyst Richard Fineberg. For KUAC news in Fairbanks, I'm Dan Bross.
