

Alaska Pipeline Plan May Increase Chance Of Spills

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By Jim Carlton

One of the Trans Alaska Pipeline's highest-ranking maintenance supervisors warned that a plan by his employer to automate the line's remote pumping stations would increase the chances of a disastrous spill.

Too few resources are being allocated for upkeep, training and emergency response, said Ronald Miller, 59 years old, who coordinates all above-ground maintenance work on the 800-mile pipeline that transports about one million barrels of oil daily from Alaska's North Slope to tankers at the ice-free port of Valdez, Alaska.

"During the chaotic nature of a spill, in the middle of the night is not the time to learn that plans will not work," Mr. Miller said last month in his 170-page complaint to the Joint Pipeline Office, a joint state-federal agency in Anchorage that oversees the pipeline. The plan, devised by pipeline operator Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., would eliminate six stations that employ as many as two dozen workers each.

Alyeska officials said that their automation plan wouldn't leave the pipeline more vulnerable to a spill. They said most major valves went through an overhaul a few years ago, training would remain a priority and spill-containment safeguards are generally well-prepared.

They said the company has incorporated 90% of Mr. Miller's recommendations. "Alyeska's position is they are glad Ron raised these issues and they have made a tremendous number of changes to their plan as a result," said Billie Garde, an Alyeska consultant in Washington, D.C., who helps mediate worker concerns.

Mr. Miller, in an interview and in a letter to the pipeline office, said the company followed primarily his minor suggestions.

Mr. Miller, a pipeline-maintenance coordinator who has worked on the pipeline since it opened in 1977, said he supports automating the pipeline for efficiency reasons. But Mr. Miller, whose job would remain under the plan, said he took the unusual route of going public with his concerns after company officials failed to heed most of them when he raised them internally last summer. He says the plan calls for no special monitoring of the hundreds of valves used to control the ebb and flow of oil through the pipeline, even though he says many are old and don't seal properly.

He also said there are no plans to make sure that dozens of designated sites along the pipeline to contain any spilled oil would actually prove effective.

Regulatory officials said they were still reviewing Alyeska's request to automate the last six of its 11 pumping stations still in use, and so couldn't comment on Mr. Miller's concerns. The other stations have been closed in recent years, as their need has been diminished by a drop-off by about one-half in the flow of crude oil from the North Slope.

Environmentalists and some other groups in Alaska have questioned Alyeska's commitment to spill prevention given what they call the cost-cutting focus of the consortium of oil companies that owns the pipeline. That consortium includes Exxon Mobil Corp., ConocoPhillips and BP PLC.

"The broad issue is that Alyeska is far too slow to identify problems and far too slow to correct them, and one of the reasons for that is everybody is under the gun to cut costs," said Richard Fineberg, an environmental consultant in Fairbanks late last week.

A spokeswoman for the owners, who are set to decide Alyeska's automation request in the first quarter of next year, declined to comment.

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