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Ruptured Pipeline Spills Oil Into Yellowstone River

By **ANAHAD O'CONNOR**

An ExxonMobil pipeline running under the Yellowstone River in south central Montana ruptured late Friday, spilling crude oil into the river and forcing evacuations.

The pipeline burst about 10 miles west of Billings, coating parts of the Yellowstone River that run past Laurel — a town of about 6,500 people downstream from the rupture — with shiny patches of oil. Precisely how much oil leaked into the river was still unclear. But throughout the day Saturday, cleanup crews in Laurel worked to lessen the impact of the spill, laying down absorbent sheets along the banks of the river to mop up some of the escaped oil, and measuring fumes to determine the health threat.

Fearing a possible explosion, officials in Laurel evacuated about 140 people on Saturday just after midnight, then allowed them to return at 4 a.m. after tests showed fumes from the leaked oil had dissipated, The Associated Press reported. While the cause of the rupture was not immediately known, Brent Peters, the fire chief for Laurel, told The A.P. that it may have been caused by high waters eroding parts of the river bed and exposing the pipeline to debris.

The pipeline is 12 inches wide and runs from Silver Tip, Mont., to Billings, an area with three refineries, ExxonMobil said. All three were shut down after the spill. ExxonMobil said it had summoned its North American Regional Response Team to help clean up the spill, and a fire spokesman in Laurel said more than 100 people, including officials with the Environmental Protection Agency, were expected to arrive at the scene by Sunday morning.

In a statement, the company said it “deeply regrets this release and is working hard with local emergency authorities to mitigate the impacts of this release on the surrounding communities and to the environment.”

“The pipeline has been shut down and the segment where the release occurred has been isolated,” the statement added. “All appropriate state and federal authorities have been alerted.”

The rupture occurred sometime around 11:30 p.m. Friday. Duane Winslow, a disaster and emergency services coordinator for Yellowstone County, told a local television station, [KTVQ](#), that all oil companies with pipelines near the river were told to immediately shut them down, and that the damaged pipe was off within half an hour. He said drinking water in the surrounding area was being monitored and so far was determined safe. Officials in Billings initially shut down water intake but later reopened it, [KTVQ](#) reported.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 2, 2011

An earlier version of this article said that the pipeline burst 10 miles east, rather than west, of Billings, Mont.