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Texans Demand Answers for Suspicious Pipeline Shutdown

HOUSTON, TX-- It's been one week since pipeline operator TransCanada shut down its Keystone XL pipeline and federal regulators still have no idea why. Although TransCanada claims that "planned maintenance" was responsible for the shut down, The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) has not made any inquiries as to why this brand new pipeline, which has only been in service since late January, already requires maintenance.

The shut down comes on the heels of recent news that PHMSA has designed new special regulatory conditions that it will apply to TransCanada if the northern portion of the Keystone pipeline is permitted. "Their new special conditions for the northern leg clearly shows that PHMSA thought the problems with KXL's southern leg were very serious," says Tom 'Smitty' Smith, director of Public Citizen's Texas office, "Yet PHMSA has not acted to assure the southern leg is safe by investigating this shut down or requiring retesting of the line."

Regulations only require PHMSA to investigate if an incident is reported. However, many Texans who live along the pipeline's route are outraged by PHMSA's lack of initiative. Last year PHMSA sent two warning letters to TransCanada detailing multiple safety code violations and shoddy construction practices witnessed in Texas and Oklahoma, yet the regulator has no plans to investigate this recent shut down.

"PHMSA's two warning letters to TransCanada are clear evidence that codes were not followed during construction," says Vicki Baggett, a safety advocate with the grassroots organization NacStop. "For TransCanada to shut down its entire line so soon after start-up is a huge red flag. Do we have to wait for a huge spill before PHMSA will involve themselves?"

"Will we ever get any straight answers?" Asks landowner and member of Texas Pipeline Watch Julia Trigg Crawford. "TransCanada won't even tell me what they're pumping across my land, it's been 33 days since I asked. Add it up, a suspect shutdown of the pipeline after just a few months online, plus a governmental oversight organization totally out of the loop, and the refusal to inform a landowner on what's coursing under the soil. Texas landowners have a right know what's going on with this project. Promoted as the finest pipeline ever built, secrecy, shutdowns and new special conditions further validate that Keystone XL isn't living up to the hype."

Bill Lowry, from PHMSA's southwest regional office, says there is no reason to inquire about line shut down because PHMSA "trusts TransCanada's process."

"With PHMSA openly acknowledging concerns with the flaws in the construction of KXL South, the reasonable expectation is for this regulatory agency to immediately shut off the line and require a third party in-line inspection," asserts Kathy DaSilva, organizer with the Tar Sands Blockade. "To do less is putting the safety and welfare of those already living with this inadequate pipeline at risk and indicates an appalling lack of concern for those along the route."

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