

Placitas has a high pressure gasoline pipeline running through Placitas.

Bellingham, Washington Pipeline spill and explosion June 10, 1999



Bellingham resident Kelly Miller looks at the devastated Whatcom Creek after a gasoline pipeline ruptured and exploded, sending a fireball down the creek June 10, 1999.

Fly-fishing school honors spirit of pipeline victim

BELLINGHAM - Ten years after his death, Liam Wood's spirit lives on in the school created to honor his passion for fly-fishing and his deep love of the natural world.



Criminal indictments in deadly pipeline explosion

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A federal grand jury brought criminal indictments yesterday against two companies and three employees in connection with the June 1999 Bellingham pipeline explosion that killed a fisherman and two 10-year-old boys who were playing in a nearby creek.

When the pipeline ruptured at Hannah Creek, about 229,000 gallons of gasoline gushed into the waterway, ignited and created a fireball that consumed the three people and left the area around the creek looking like a battlefield.

From Hannah Creek, thousand of gallons of fuel rushed into Whatcom Creek, which empties into Bellingham Bay.

The indictments allege disregard of safety regulations and procedures and failure to make critical repairs as required by the federal Hazardous Liquid Pipeline Safety Act. And it directly links these alleged criminal actions to the explosion.

Marlene Robinson, mother of 18-year-old Liam Wood, who died while fishing in Whatcom Creek, called the filing of felony charges "a relief. This indictment shows that for corporations, profit cannot be their only bottom line."

The indictments name the Olympic Pipe Line Co., Equilon Pipeline Co., and three of their officers or employees: Frank Hopf Jr., vice president and manager of Olympic; Ronald Dean Brentson, the Olympic executive in charge of monitoring and controlling the pipeline, and Kevin Scott Dyvig, a pipeline controller.

Five of the counts allege felony violations of the pipeline safety act. The two others allege misdemeanor violations of the Clean Water Act by negligent discharge of oil into a navigable water.

Brentson faces three felony counts, Hopf faces one misdemeanor and one felony count, and Dyvig one misdemeanor charge.

The indictments charge in detail how Olympic, with Hopf at the helm:

- Failed to protect its pipeline while new water pipelines were laid above and below it.
- Ignored damage detected after the water pipes were laid.
- Violated its spill prevention plan filed with the state that provided for Olympic to excavate and visually inspect the damage detected after the water pipes were laid.
- Ignored information that indicated increasing pressure in the pipeline.
- Ignored repeated automatic shutdowns caused by the improper pressure surge relief valve settings and continued to operate with the dangerous system configuration.
- Ignored a June 10, 1999 failure of the pressure surge relief valve that led to the catastrophic rupture at the exact location where the water pipes had been laid. Pumps upstream of the rupture were restarted without investigating why they had automatically shutdown, thus allowing the additional release of about 79,000 gallons.