

Pipeline safety notes March 2005

—Adelbert Miller

Many people are unaware that Placitas is on a major interstate pipeline corridor. Underground pipelines tend to be out of sight and out of mind. However, if we are to minimize the risk of an accident, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that we all know a few things about the pipelines in our area.

In October, we had a reminder of the importance of public education about pipelines. A Kinder Morgan pipeline blew a relief valve and lost 772 barrels of carbon dioxide (that's 32,424 gallons). In the annals of pipeline incidents, this was minor. But it highlights the reason for knowing where pipelines are, what they contain, and what we can do to keep ourselves safe in the event of an accident.

What do these pipelines carry and where are they?

Five large pipelines traverse Placitas on their way from the Four Corners to the southeast corner of the state. Three are owned by Enterprise, of those, two (twelve- and ten-inch) carry natural gas liquids, e.g., butane, ethane, and propane, and one (eight-inch) carries refined products, e.g., gasoline, jet fuel, and diesel. One (thirty-inch) is owned by Kinder Morgan and carries carbon dioxide. One (sixteen-inch) is owned by Shell and was formerly approved for crude oil. Shell's project proposal to convert this pipeline to refined products has for the moment been abandoned and the line is currently idle.

The pipelines enter our area in one broad swath north of Sundance subdivision on Santa Ana Pueblo land and then they cross BLM land to reach Albuquerque's Placitas Open Space. At this point, four of the pipelines begin to take a more northerly route. They enter Placitas Ranchettes subdivision, traverse Cedar Creek subdivision, cross Las Huertas Creek, and then parallel Camino de la Rose Castilla. Finally, they cross Diamond Tail subdivision and head southeast toward the East Mountains. The fifth pipeline (Shell) heads slightly south, eventually meeting up with Camino de Las Huertas and passing just north of the Elementary School, crossing the parking lot of the community center and then heading uphill to cross the Sandia Mountains.

Why does the NTSB think the public should be educated about pipelines? What could we possibly do about them?

Knowing how to recognize a leak and what to do (and not to do) can be the difference between a simple cleanup and a community tragedy. Pipeline accidents are infrequent; the Placitas area has averaged one every other year over the last ten years. Pipelines carry hazardous materials that are safe only when properly contained; if they spill, serious accidents can occur.

Natural-gas liquids are especially dangerous. When they leak they form a cloud that can look like a mist or fog. That mist can explode with even a tiny spark. If you see a fog near the pipelines, don't drive near it. Don't use a cell phone. Leave the area on foot.

Refined products are also dangerous; they may appear as a dark spot on the ground, or a geyser of liquid shooting high in the air. Again, avoid sparks; do not drive a car near the spill, quickly leave the area on foot, and don't use a cell phone.

Carbon dioxide is probably the least dangerous of the materials running through these pipelines; while a large spill could settle in low areas and cause suffocation, there has never been a fatality from a carbon-dioxide pipeline spill.

Once you are well away from the spill, call 911 to report it. Do not try to get close to the pipeline signs to get the phone number to call—since there are multiple pipelines it would be easy to get the number for the wrong company and delay the emergency response.

Other than recognizing spills, is there anything else I should know?

There are several things. First and perhaps most importantly, New Mexico requires that you notify New Mexico One Call, 1-800-321-ALERT, before excavating. That phone call will inform all owners of underground utilities of your excavation plans. There is no charge for this service; within two days they will come mark their lines. If you don't call and you damage underground utilities, you can be fined. If you damage a pipeline and don't report it, it can be a felony. Don't take chances, especially in a community with large hazardous pipelines. Call before you dig!

Second, don't assume that the pipeline is immediately under the sign. The sign may have fallen and been put back in the ground by someone other than the pipeline company. If you need to know exactly where the pipeline is, call the number on the sign and the company can send someone out to locate it for you.

Third, don't assume that shallow excavation is safe because the pipeline would be deeply buried. There is no requirement that depth of cover be maintained, so a pipeline can legally be quite close to the surface. In our community, one pipeline is even exposed in some areas.

Fourth, the most common pipeline accident occurs on distribution pipelines (the ones that bring gas to your home for cooking and heating). For those pipelines, the most common causes of accidents are excavation and motor vehicles striking aboveground facilities. You can prevent these accidents by calling before you dig and locating your gas meter far from your driveway.

Fifth, the most common cause of accidents on transmission pipelines (the ones that traverse the country carrying large quantities of materials) is corrosion. Although laws and regulations have recently been strengthened, it is estimated that fewer than 15 percent of the nation's transmission pipelines are required to be inspected.

What if I want to learn more?

If you have a question about a specific pipeline, you can go to a Web site operated by the federal Office of Pipeline Safety at <http://199.107.71.24/publicsearch/>, and input your location to learn who operates pipelines in your area and how to contact the company. The OPS home page is at

<http://ops.dot.gov/>. If you want to know more about what is being done to make pipelines safer, go to the Pipeline Safety Trust Web site at www.pstrust.org/. Or call me in Placitas: Bert Miller, President, Citizens for Safe Pipelines, 771-8358.