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Crude oil spill north of Shiprock, N.M., quickly contained

SHIPROCK, N.M. – On Dec. 11, 2023, a Navajo chapter grader operator working on Indian Route 5071 struck a 16-inch crude oil pipeline and caused the release of crude oil into a nearby dry sandy wash.

No injuries or fires were reported.

According to Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency Director Stephen B. Etsitty, the spill location is about 2.5 miles northwest of Shiprock and half mile west of U.S. 491.

The pipeline is operated by Running Horse Pipeline.

“Repair of the pipeline is in compliance with the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Administration regulations and Navajo Nation EPA requirements,” Etsitty said. “Running Horse Pipeline has reported to me that work is expected to be done this Saturday.”

A Navajo fire truck and three Navajo police officers responded to the site where officers restricted public access to the site from both directions.

Shortly after being notified by Running Horse, Navajo Nation EPA arrived on the scene to assess

the situation and to meet with both pipeline company personnel and Navajo Nation police, Etsitty said.



Personnel with the Navajo Police Dept., Navajo Nation Fire Dept., NTUA, Running Horse Pipeline Co. and the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency were on site soon after a chapter grader caused a crude oil spill northwest of Shiprock, N.M., Dec. 11. No injuries or fires were reported.

The pipeline was not operating at the time it was hit by the grader but contained crude oil.

The operator next called NTUA. Its workers arrived on-site and called the pipeline company when it was determined the pipeline did not belong to NTUA.

Once Running Horse was notified, it dispatched a crew to the scene and began to call various agencies to notify them of the spill, including the National Response Center, EPA said.

A Dec. 11-12 Navajo Nation EPA water quality field investigation reports the crude oil traveled about 550 feet down the roadside ditch and another 1,800 feet down the small, dry wash before berms were constructed to capture remaining flow near the roadside.

Pipeline company contractors pumped up the pooled crude oil that same afternoon and had a clamp secured over the damaged section of pipe that evening.

The next day, an additional berm was placed at the bottom end of the release. Excavation of the contaminated soil began in the dry wash.

The nearby Hogback Canal was not impacted and will not be impacted because the drainage flows under it via a culvert, Etsitty said.

Navajo EPA will continue to monitor remediation and make repairs at the spill location, he said. This includes coordination with a pipeline company contractor on sample collection to determine the effectiveness of remediation of the dry wash.

Excavated contaminated soil is being stockpiled onsite and will be transported to the Envirotech landfill located south of Bloomfield, N.M., once the road is repaired.

Etsitty said Navajo EPA was informed that approximately 1,500 barrels of crude oil was released from the ruptured pipeline. Of this total, approximately 800 barrels of oil were recovered and 700 barrels soaked into the soil along the flow path from the source.



Running Horse Pipeline is continuing to repair and replace pipeline sections and install stopple plugs both upstream and downstream of the isolated pipeline section.

As of Tuesday, initial excavation of the contaminated soil is nearly complete, Etsitty said. Additional excavation may be required depending on test results and visual inspection.

For more information, contact Patrick Antonio (patrickantonio@navajo-nsn.gov) or Steve Austin (nnepawq@frontiernet.net) of the Navajo EPA – Water Quality/NPDES Program.

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