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Protecting Alaska's Cook Inlet watershed and the life it sustains

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Cook Inlet Keeper Analysis Shows Favorable Oil Pipeline Spill Trends Offshore Oil and Oil/Gas Field Pipeline Releases Continue, However

As part of Cook Inlet Keeper's ongoing monitoring of oil and gas operations in the Cook Inlet watershed, Senior Engineer Lois Epstein today issued her third analysis of pipeline spills using State of Alaska spill data from 1997-2005. Positive trends include a reduction in oil pipeline spills from 1.1 per month to 0.5 per month in the watershed and a significant decrease in pipeline corrosion as a cause of releases. The most important negative trend is the rise in natural gas pipeline spills from 0.8 per year to 3 per year, an increase of 375%. The rate of offshore oil pipeline spills remained unchanged throughout the period examined at approximately one release each year.

"Cook Inlet Keeper commends pipeline operators for reducing the overall oil spill rate to less than half what it was when we first started publicizing pipeline spills," stated Epstein. "Nevertheless, harmful but preventable pipeline releases still occur, and we are particularly disappointed that offshore releases have not slowed. Offshore releases harm Cook Inlet's fishing industry and can impact our magnificent coastline."

As was true in Keeper's previous pipeline analyses, Unocal (now owned by Chevron) has a disproportionately high pipeline spill rate with approximately 3/4 of all reported oil pipeline releases but only 39% of the oil pipeline mileage in the Cook Inlet watershed. A high percentage of Unocal's releases come from its unregulated oil field gathering and flow lines in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, rather than its transmission pipelines; both the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and the federal Office of Pipeline Safety are considering new regulations for gathering and flow lines to close this significant regulatory loophole.

Another positive finding was that XTO Energy, Tesoro, and Kenai Pipe Line reported zero oil pipeline spills for the past three years.

In contrast to the favorable trend for overall Cook Inlet oil pipeline releases, spills of hazardous substances from natural gas pipelines in the watershed are up significantly. Released liquids from natural gas pipelines consist primarily of produced water (briny water with oil/gas field contaminants) and natural gas condensates, which can pollute waterways and harm vegetation and wildlife. Since 1997, half or more of the gas pipeline releases in the watershed have been greater than 50 gallons, including a 10,500 gallon produced water and condensate spill at Marathon's gas field in the Kenai Refuge in November 2004.

"By releasing produced water and condensates, natural gas pipelines can cause significant harm. With natural gas exploration and production in the Cook Inlet region increasing, Cook Inlet Keeper intends to remain vigilant in watch-dogging these operations and we urge the state government to do so as well," added Epstein.

Additional findings and pipeline spill data can be reviewed at www.inletkeeper.org/pipelines.htm.

Cook Inlet Keeper is a citizen-based organization that combines advocacy, research, education and water quality monitoring to protect Alaska's Cook Inlet watershed and the life it sustains.