Mobile Area Water & Sewer System (MAWSS)
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MAWSS to Fight Oil Pipeline in Big Creek Lake Watershed

KBR Report and Other Information on Pipeline Safety Issues

The Board of Mobile Area Water & Sewer System (MAWSS) passed a resolution on Monday opposing a new oil pipeline in the watershed of Big Creek Lake, the sole source of drinking water for 250,000 people in the cities of Mobile, Prichard, Chickasaw, Semmes, parts of Mobile County and Spanish Fort in Baldwin County.

The Board will fight Plains Southcap LLC's efforts to condemn MAWSS' land in the watershed. This land is for the public water supply. Since first approached by Plains for an easement in the summer of 2012, MAWSS has repeatedly stated that the oil pipeline should be located outside the watershed, away from the drinking water supply. An independent evaluation of the pipeline by KBR reinforces that opinion, along with other information gathered by MAWSS' staff.

The KBR study provides an independent review of the proposed pipeline design as well as Plains' plans for construction and operation. The study acknowledges that the pipeline design meets regulations and industry guidelines for pipelines in general. However, this pipeline will be in an unusually sensitive environment- the Big Creek Lake watershed. Meeting basic pipeline design requirements is not enough.

The KBR report cites national pipeline statistics by the Pipeline and Hazardous Material Safety Administration (PHMSA) indicating that pipelines do leak, break and spill posing a risk to the drinking water supply.

The conclusion of the report's executive summary states, "The only option that would remove all the risks related to this pipeline to the Big Creek Lake Watershed would be to completely relocate the pipeline route out of the watershed." That statement is repeated 20 times throughout the KBR report.

As the report states, “A rupture or leak inside the watershed would be a catastrophic event to MAWSS’ raw water reservoir,” Leaks or ruptures resulting in pipeline failure can be caused by issues related to manufacture and materials, construction issues, corrosion of the pipe, either external or internal, equipment failures, lightning, scouring of creeks during heavy rains resulting in exposure of the pipe and subsequent damage, third party acts such as vandalism and other factors. Leaks or breaks can go undetected by the pipeline company if there is a failure of monitoring systems, equipment or personnel. Once a leak is detected and response personnel are notified, it still takes time for crews to get to the watershed and begin efforts to clean up the water and the land. The KBR report states, “A slow response to a leak both in shutting down and system and reacting to any oil that escapes from the pipeline can have catastrophic consequences. “

The report lists possible mitigation actions for factors which can cause pipe breaks or leaks but concludes after each, “The only option that would eliminate all risks to the Big Creek Lake Watershed would be to completely relocate the pipeline route out of the watershed.”

A pipeline rupture in or near Hamilton Creek, one of the major feeder streams for the Lake, would be especially devastating. The pipeline crosses Hamilton Creek and runs parallel to the creek in some areas. Even with additional shut off valves, Plains’ “drain down” analysis indicates a pipeline breach could release up to 2,100 barrels of oil, the equivalent of 82,000 gallons of oil, into Hamilton Creek after the line is shut down. The KBR report states, “Such an event, combined with peak water flows into Big Creek Lake during a storm would be a significant and long-term threat to the drinking water supply.” The pipeline also crosses many other smaller streams.

The pipeline Plains wants to build will be monitored remotely from Midland, Texas by satellite. MAWSS was told a specific spill response plan for this pipeline would not be available until the pipeline construction is completed. The generic response plan reviewed by MAWSS was unsatisfactory and did not meet expectations for clean up procedures.

The KBR report was just one factor in the Board’s decision. Historical data regarding spills on Plains’ pipelines were also cause for concern.

In June, Plains Midstream Canada responded to its third leak in three years to a pipeline in northern Alberta. An estimated 950 barrels of natural gas liquids and by-products activated emergency response procedures.

Last Spring, another Plains Midstream Canada incident saw 3,000 barrels of sour crude leaked into Red Deer River system, a major source of drinking water in central Alberta.

In February, Plains All American had what’s been called “ the worst inland oil spill in Mississippi since the late 1990’s.” An eight inch line leaked 16,800 gallons in Jasper County.

The light crude flowed into Piney Branch Creek and was first reported by a man who saw it in the creek.

In 2011, a Plains Midstream pipeline in Alberta spilled 28,000 barrels of oil northeast of Peace River, closing a school in Little Buffalo and creating health problems for people in the area.

In 2010, the EPA and U.S. Justice Department announced terms of a consent decree with Plains All American for violations of the Clean Water Act as a result of 10 crude oil spills between 2004 and 2007 in Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana that resulted in 273, 420 gallons of crude oil into area waters.

"MAWSS' mission is to protect and enhance the health, safety and economic well-being of our community through responsible management of water resources," said MAWSS Director Charles Hyland. "We again call for Plains to relocate the pipeline out of the watershed. The prospect of contaminating our drinking water is a risk we cannot accept."