



# Amid Pipeline Debate, Two Costly Cleanups Forever Change Towns



Sean Proctor for The New York Times

The Environmental Protection Agency estimated in May that 180,000 gallons of oil sands crude remained in the Kalamazoo River in Michigan, three years after a pipeline ruptured.

By DAN FROSCH  
Published: August 10, 2013

MARSHALL, Mich. — As the Obama administration inches closer to a decision on whether to approve construction of the much-debated Keystone XL pipeline, costly cleanup efforts in two communities stricken by oil spills portend the potential hazards of transporting heavy Canadian crude.

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It has been three years since an Enbridge Energy pipeline ruptured beneath this small western Michigan town, [spewing more than 840,000 gallons](#) of thick oil sands crude into the Kalamazoo River and Talmadge Creek, the largest oil pipeline failure in the country's history. Last March, an [Exxon Mobil pipeline burst](#) in Mayflower, Ark., releasing thousands of gallons of oil and forcing the evacuation of 22 homes.

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A cleanup site in Mayflower, Ark., where a line burst in March.



Both pipeline companies have spent tens of millions of dollars trying to recover the heavy crude, similar to the product Keystone XL would carry. River and floodplain ecosystems have had to be restored, and neighborhoods are still being refurbished. Legal battles are being waged, and residents' lives have been forever changed.

"All oil spills are pretty ugly and not easy to clean up," said [Stephen K. Hamilton](#), a professor of aquatic ecology at Michigan State University who is advising the Environmental Protection Agency and the state on the cleanup in Marshall. "But this kind of an oil is even harder to clean up because of its tendency to stick to surfaces and its tendency to become submerged."

Before July 26, 2010, hardly anyone in Marshall had heard of [Enbridge Energy Partners](#), a Houston firm whose parent company is based in Calgary, Alberta.

On a recent midsummer morning, the Kalamazoo looked almost the way it once did. Towering oak trees draped over the water in the heat. Hawks patrolled the deep green riverbanks. An elderly couple lugged fishing tackle toward a shady area. If not for two motorboats whirring downstream and three men probing the water with poles, there would have been no sign that anything had gone wrong.

Much of Kalamazoo's plant and animal life has returned. But ridding the water of all the oil — some of which sank to the river floor and continues to generate a kaleidoscopic sheen — has proved elusive. Though a 40-mile stretch of the river has reopened after being closed for two years and most of the oil has been recovered or has evaporated, vestiges of the spill are everywhere. "For Sale" signs dot the rolling cornfields and soy farms. Once-coveted riverfront homes sit vacant.

Matt Davis, a real estate agent here, said he had struggled to sell homes since the spill. "Enbridge hopes people forget," Mr. Davis said. "But this is my town. This is where I grew up. Enbridge isn't from around here.

"We didn't ask for them to have their pipeline burst in our backyard. Make it right. Take care of the mess you made."

In May, the E.P.A. found that Enbridge had drastically underestimated the amount of oil still in the river. The agency estimated that 180,000 gallons had most likely drifted to the bottom, more than 100 times Enbridge's projection. It has ordered Enbridge to dredge sections of the river where stubborn beads of oil remain submerged.

The dredging started on July 30, and stretches of the river are being closed again. Construction crews have rumbled onto the riverfront in nearby Comstock Township, angering residents and business owners who remain fearful of another accident.

Jason Manshum, an Enbridge spokesman, said the company was working to address the township's concerns as it followed the orders of the E.P.A. "This is the single-largest incident in the history of our organization," he said. "From the beginning, in July 2010, we said that we would be committed to this community and the natural environment, for as long as it would take to right the rupture that happened. About three years later to the day, we're still here."

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Larry Bell, who owns Bell's Brewery, one of the country's largest craft beer makers, was shocked earlier this summer to see workers clear a staging area next to his brewery near Marshall. "We're going to be downwind of this thing," said Mr. Bell, who filed a lawsuit last month asserting that Enbridge did not get permission from the local condominium association to build its dredge pad.

"If those airborne contaminants come in, it's going to get into our ingredients," Mr. Bell said. "We see that as irreparable. They can't compensate me for taking away my business."

A version of this article appeared in print on August 11, 2013, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Amid Pipeline Debate, Two Costly Cleanups Forever Change Towns.

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