



# Spilling What You Can't Clean Up

The true story of the Kalamazoo River tar sands pipeline disaster

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On July 29, 2012, the National Academy of Sciences will hold a hearing on the risks of tar sands-diluted bitumen in pipelines. This panel of scientists, engineers and experts—have any of them actually seen what a million gallons of tar sands does to a river, to a community? If you want to know whether tar sands oil is safe, come to Michigan and see firsthand.

I'll be happy to take you for a tour.



## **Monday Morning, July 25, 2010**

The Enbridge spill happened on a Sunday two years ago. On Monday morning, we got our children in the car to head to daycare. Leaving the house, I noticed an odor in the air and assumed the odor was a gas leak or something at one of the gas stations. As we drove closer to the daycare, the odor got stronger and stronger. The daycare was approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile north where Talmadge Creek and the Kalamazoo River intersect. I felt that something just wasn't right.

My husband and I dropped off our children at 7:30 and headed to work. At that time we didn't know what was going on, we just knew there was an odor in the air. When we picked up the children that evening, people were talking about something strange going on. The spill was now on the news but nothing official, no warnings. That evening, my son was throwing up. My daughter, within a few days of the spill, developed a strange rash. My daughter was only two, and my son was four-and-a-half, both too young to communicate just what was wrong.

## **Air Contamination and Illness**

Our home is approximately two miles north of the spill. You could smell it from our house. We had to keep the windows shut. We have an older air-conditioning system that draws air from the outside so we really didn't try to turn it on. We couldn't open the windows. Saturday, almost a week after the spill, our dog, a small Boston terrier, was in our backyard the entire day. Didn't think anything of it. That evening, he was violently sick. Diarrhea, vomiting. We called our veterinarian on their emergency number. They said without a doubt, it was exposure to chemicals in the air that made our dog sick. This past December he was diagnosed, and has had two surgeries, for a form a cancer that is caused by "environmental factors."



With respect to the daycare center - we started contacting our physicians, the county health department and the federal Center for Disease Control, asking about the health impacts of the spill on our children. Children were getting sick, staff were getting sick - migraine headaches, nausea, diarrhea, strange rashes, burning in the eyes and throat. None of health officials would associate the sickness to the oil spill. They wouldn't say much of anything.

I requested monitoring to check the air quality at the daycare. We got nowhere with officials for a full week. Then we got a news reporter to come out and stand at the playground and talk about what was happening. Finally, an air monitor was set up at the daycare. The daycare stayed open because they were told specifically by Enbridge, the County and State Health Departments that everything was fine. They said it's just a nuisance, everything's okay. But people were legitimately sick.

### **Government Inaction, Corporate Irresponsibility**

Government health officials, at the local, state and federal level, are just as much at fault as the pipeline operators, if not more so. I hold them to a higher standard than the pipeline operators, their job is to protect our health. Enbridge states they were meeting all federal and state guidelines. My response, do more than meet, exceed.

A week or two before the spill occurred Enbridge had requested yet another delay on a Corrective Action Order to fix a flaw near Talmadge Creek in their Line 6B. They knew about a problem in their pipe and used bureaucratic maneuvering to put off fixing it for years. Federal pipeline-safety authorities knew about the problems too. It is a shared negligence.

Two years later, there's residual oil in the river and on the outer banks. We have health concerns, for our children, ourselves and animals. We have concerns about property



values and businesses. I received an e-mail from the National Transportation Safety Board saying, "I hope the findings of the NTSB report helps bring closure for the communities who have been impacted by this spill." While the NTSB's findings and recommendations truly helps bring light to the severity of a tar sand spill, it will never bring closure. The oil is still here, we are still here, and the nation, if not the whole world, needs to learn from this tragedy.

### **Tar Sands are Toxic**

This tar sands crude is not just regular oil. They call it diluted bitumen. Bitumen is the tar sands crude oil that looks like asphalt. To thin it enough to pump it through a pipeline, they have to dilute it with hydrocarbons filled with heavy metals and toxic chemicals. Then the "dilbit" is pumped through pipes at high pressure and temperature. At normal pressure and temperature, the tar sands are too thick to flow.

This stuff is more toxic than regular crude oil, but nobody — first responders, health officials, parents, not even federal regulators - even knew it. And while emergency workers tried to clean up the mess, and families tried to get on with their lives, Enbridge did not immediately disclose the type of crude. It took weeks before Enbridge admitted that what it spilled was highly toxic tar sands that behaves totally differently than regular crude oil.

### **Telling the Truth about Tar Sands**

We asked the DEQ, Environmental Protection Agency, and first responders whether they would have acted differently at the beginning of the spill if they had known that it was tar sands.

The first year or so, they all said, no, they wouldn't have responded differently. Now,



two years later, they're saying they would have. I asked the Health Department about exposure to children -- are they at a higher risk than a full-grown adult? For two years they said, "Oh, no. It's all the same readings, it's all the same levels, it's all the same exposure." Now, two years later, they say children are at a higher risk. How dare they do that to us!

### **Health Crisis**

I'm a parent, trying to make decisions about what to do in a crisis, and I'm told by the Health Department, by the county and the state, and by unified command that everything is okay, that our children are fine, our children are safe. We found out a year after the spill that Enbridge offered to temporarily relocate the daycare. But they didn't tell or ask parents, they only made the offer to the directors of the daycare center. My family and those impacted have to live knowing that nobody knows the long-term health effects. I will continue to fight for a health study for humans and animals.

Public health officials, first responders — none of them knew that there was a pipeline running through our town. And they had no idea what that pipeline was carrying. First responders were not properly trained. County officials asked me, what did you expect us to do, evacuate a whole town? My response, yes you do. You find a way.

My children were sick, we were sick, other community members have been sick. In the past two years, 11 people in one trailer park 13 miles downstream from ground zero have died. The river runs within 200 feet of the park and flows  $\frac{3}{4}$  around it.

### **What if You Can't Clean Up?**

If you want to study tar sands, diluted bitumen, and dilbit pipeline safety, come to Michigan. See just how devastating tar sands is to the environment and communities.



Come see what the river looks like, even after an \$800 million cleanup. Come see what the riverbank looks like, and just how much submerged oil is still here. All you have to do is agitate the water and it comes up. There are approximately 390 acres of submerged oil. And somehow the cleanup is done?

Just like the EPA admits, they're making it up as they go along. They have no idea how much tar sands crude is in the river. We have no idea what the long-term implications of the oil and air pollution are.

### **The Learning the Lesson of the Kalamazoo Tar Sands Spill**

Even after all this, I don't oppose pipelines. I am just an advocate for safety.

Right now, tar sands are not safe. Tar sands pipelines are not safe. And tar sands companies and the public health officials who are supposed to protect us are not up to the job of keep us safe.

I say, come to Michigan and see what a tar sands spill looks like. Because until we are sure beyond any doubt that companies will actually fix faulty pipelines, until we know that public health officials will actually protect our children, until we know what we're dealing with and how to clean it up, tar sands oil is just too dangerous. And if that means not running tar sands through a pipeline, then so be it.