



Crude oil train derailment on the banks of the Galena River in Illinois.

Accidents Waiting to Happen

Oil Trains and Pipelines

Millions of gallons of crude oil are transported daily across the country via freight rail and pipelines that frequently cross or travel alongside vulnerable rivers and streams.

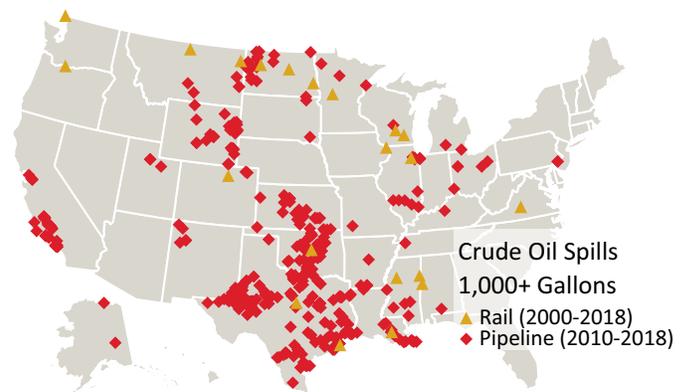
On October 29, 2019, the Keystone Pipeline ruptured in North Dakota, spilling 383,000 gallons of oil — the equivalent of 13 oil train tank cars. An estimated half-acre of wetland was fouled by the pollutant.

Hundreds of Thousands of Miles of Oil Rail and Pipeline Crisscross the U.S.

Approximately 140,000 miles of freight railroads and 200,000 miles of long-distance pipelines carry more than 9 billion barrels of crude oil across the U.S. each year. The oil they carry is highly toxic to wildlife, both because of the toxicity of its chemical components and the physical effects of oil contamination, such as the coating of animals' fur or feathers. Oil also contains carcinogens like benzene that pose long-term threats to human health.

Oil Trains and Pipelines Threaten Vulnerable Waterways

Both trains and pipelines frequently pass near or over water, and rail lines are often built along rivers to maintain moderate grades. Both frequently spill, with causes including train derailments, pipeline corrosion, and digging accidents. Meanwhile, only about 10 percent of America's 240,000 miles of gathering pipelines fall under federal safety and construction regulations, and rail oil shipments can travel in mile-long trains that threaten catastrophic spills.



Since 2000, there have been at least 21 train spills and 734 pipeline spills of crude oil of 1,000 gallons or more.



This Keystone Pipeline rupture in South Dakota led to the spill of approximately 5,000 barrels of oil.

Serious Oil Train and Pipeline Spills Are Common

Oil trains and pipelines spill frequently, often with serious consequences. Since 2000, there have been at least 21 railway spills and 734 pipeline spills of crude oil over 1,000 gallons.

In February 2015, a train carrying crude oil derailed in Mount Carbon in West Virginia, likely caused by a track defect. Twenty-seven tank cars, each carrying nearly 30,000 of crude oil, derailed. Oil flowed into the nearby Kanawha River and Armstrong Creek, shutting down nearby water intakes and affecting water access for thousands of customers.

In January 2015, a pipeline rupture near Glendive, Montana, spilled 50,000 gallons of oil into the Yellowstone River, causing the governor to declare a state of emergency. The spill contaminated the river with unsafe levels of benzene, caused gill and liver problems in fish, and harmed migratory birds including bald eagles.

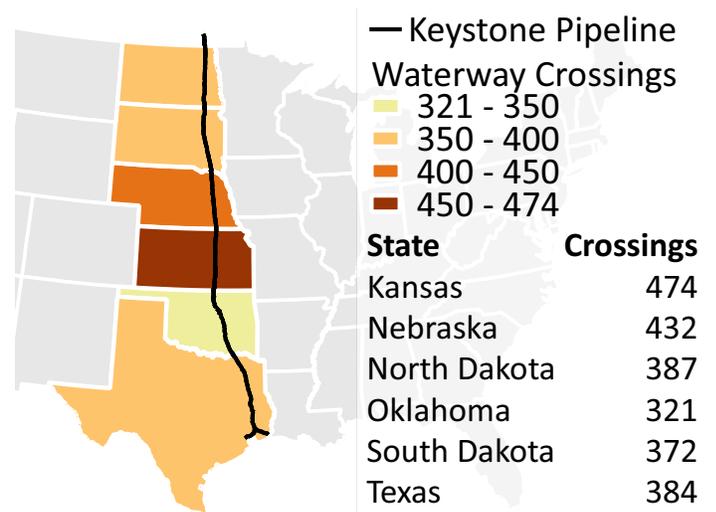
Protect American Waterways from Damaging Spills

Oil trains and pipelines put America's streams and rivers at risk, but it doesn't have to be that way. Policymakers have a number of options to protect our waterways from all types of catastrophic accidents. Policymakers should work to:

Limit or end operations that pose severe threats to water. The best way to prevent toxic spills is to limit activities that create the potential for spills in the first place, including eliminating the need for oil pipelines and trains by transitioning to clean, renewable energy.

Keep risky facilities away from water. Policymakers should reject any new oil pipelines or train routes near our waterways.

Set and enforce strict standards for existing risky facilities that operate near waterways. For existing oil pipelines and trains, officials must enforce stricter standards to reduce risks to clean water.



The Keystone Pipeline makes 2,370 waterway crossings in the U.S.

Threat Spotlight: Keystone Pipeline

The Keystone Pipeline, which has already suffered multiple spills including a 210,000-gallon spill in November 2017, likely threatens thousands of waterways along its route. The pipeline makes 2,370 waterway crossings, more than 300 crossings in each of the six states it passes through.

The pipeline also passes through 455 miles of 100-year flood zones, 11 percent of the total length of the pipeline. For 1.3 miles of its route, the Keystone Pipeline runs through a flood zone by the Sabine River in northeast Texas. According to a report by Public Citizen, “[d]ozens of anomalies, including dents and welds” were found along a stretch of the pipeline in the area north of the Sabine River.



For more information and the full report,
please visit

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Photo credits: Front (top and middle): U.S. EPA; front (bottom): National Transportation Safety Board