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Remembering Bellingham: Pipeline Accident Plays Huge Role in Restructuring DOT's Pipeline Safety Program

Ten years ago Bellingham, Wash., experienced one of the worst pipeline accidents in the history of pipeline safety. On June 10, 1999, 250,000 gallons of gasoline from a ruptured, large transmission pipeline spilled into a nearby creek, accidentally ignited, and led to the deaths of three young individuals, eight injuries, and over \$45 million in property damages.

In June 2009, the citizens of this community commemorated the tenth anniversary of this tragic accident, the lives of the three victims Wade King,

Stephen Tsiorvias, and Liam Wood, and the recuperation of their community. Although the citizens remain keenly aware of the accident and its effects on their lives, the community shows visual signs of recovery, including restorations of Whatcom Creek and surrounding areas.

Jeff Wiese, PHMSA's Associate Administrator for Pipeline Safety joined the community during their remembrance to pay respects to the residents and to help honor the memory of the three young men whose lives were lost. Mr. Wiese thanked the community for their leadership in making positive improvements nationwide for pipeline safety.

Since the tragedy in Bellingham, the Department of Transportation has seen significant growth in both the level of interest and the size and scope of its pipeline safety program.

Through the Norman Y. Mineta Research and Special Programs Improvement Act of 2004, the Department reorganized the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, into an agency with the mission to further the highest degree of safety in pipeline and hazardous materials transportation.

With a newly named pipeline safety agency and the passage of legislation by Congress providing more regulatory tools at its disposal (Pipeline Safety Improvement Act of 2002; Pipeline

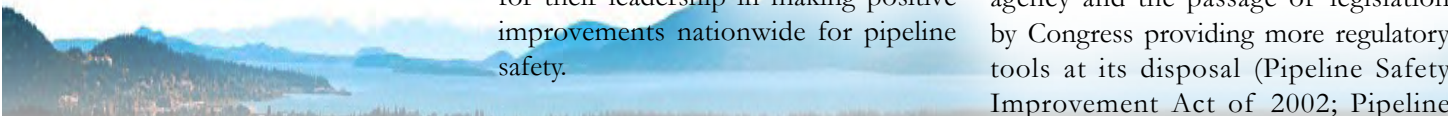


Photo Courtesy of the City of Bellingham <http://www.cob.org/>

Continued on page 2

Bellingham

Continued from Cover

Inspection, Protection, Enforcement and Safety Act of 2006), the Department has been able to raise the rigor of its regulatory standards for pipelines, improve the quality of oversight and enforcement, and invest more heavily in pipeline technology improvements.

Through PHMSA, the Department's pipeline inspection and enforcement capabilities have been expanded and improved. Building a far more robust and transparent safety enforcement program, PHMSA doubled the number of pipeline inspectors and accident investigators and increased its proposed civil penalty amounts by eight times its 2002 figures.

The agency is also aggressively advancing

safety technologies, providing more resources for research and development projects that seek solutions to the most common causes of pipeline failures.

New integrity management regulations have been responsible for tens of thousands of repairs along miles and miles of pipelines where accidents could result in tragic consequence. These regulations require companies to review safety processes, develop procedures to assure the safe operation of these processes, and conduct continual review and monitoring of their pipeline infrastructure. The agency is confident that this approach promotes continuous safety improvement throughout the industry and leads to better performance.

In addition to these improvements, PHMSA introduced a variety of damage

prevention programs, including helping to establish "8-1-1," the three-digit "Call Before You Dig" number allowing anyone in the country the ability to help eliminate third party damages to pipelines - - the type of damage eventually determined to be the cause of the pipeline accident in Bellingham.

Over the past 20 years, these efforts have resulted in an average reduction in serious pipeline accidents of 10 percent every three years - - accidents resulting in severe impacts to people, such as death and injuries.

Even with these figures PHMSA knows its job in enhancing pipeline transportation safety is not done.