

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD IDENTIFIES THE REAL THREAT TO PIPELINES: PG&E

A year ago, I suggested that PG&E's willful incompetence was probably a bigger threat to critical infrastructure and key resources like pipelines than the anti-fracking activists PA investigated as potential terrorist threats.

Just to take one example, who do you think is a greater risk to our oil and gas infrastructure? A bunch of hippie protesters trying to limit drilling in the Marcellus Shale and thereby protect the quality of their drinking water (which is, itself, considered critical infrastructure)? Or PG&E, which sat on knowledge of an extremely high risk pipeline for three years even after setting aside the money to fix it?

Three years ago, PG&E asked state regulators for permission to spend \$4.87 million to replace a section of the pipeline associated with the pipe that exploded in San Bruno last Thursday. The 1.42-mile section that ran under South San Francisco, which is more heavily populated than San Bruno, was considered extremely high risk and in need to replacement. Last year, the utility company made a similar request to replace a larger section of the same pipeline, at a cost of \$13 million. Rate increases were approved and the plan should have gone forward. Sadly, nothing was done and lives were lost.

The South San Francisco pipeline

replacement project was dropped down on the priority list and the money allocated for the work was spent elsewhere. Many experts and laypersons alike are now asking, why didn't PG&E replace pipes they knew to be extremely dangerous?

It appears the National Transportation Safety Board—which just issued a scathing report on PG&E San Bruno explosion—agrees with me. It's findings include the following:

- Had a properly prepared contingency plan for the Milpitas Terminal electrical work been in place and been executed, the loss of pressure control could have been anticipated and planned for, thereby minimizing or avoiding the pressure deviations.
- PG&E lacked detailed and comprehensive procedures for responding to a large-scale emergency such as a transmission line break, including a defined command structure that clearly assigns a single point of leadership and allocates specific duties to supervisory control and data acquisition staff and other involved employees.
- PG&E's supervisory control and data acquisition system limitations contributed to

the delay in recognizing that there had been a transmission line break and quickly pinpointing its location.

- The 95 minutes that PG&E took to stop the flow of gas by isolating the rupture site was excessive.

[snip]

- The PG&E gas transmission integrity management program was deficient and ineffective.
- PG&E's public awareness program self-evaluation was ineffective at identifying and correcting deficiencies.
- The deficiencies identified during this investigation are indicative of an organizational accident.
- The multiple and recurring deficiencies in PG&E operational practices indicate a systemic problem.

If the folks running our pipelines suffer from such systemic problems they can't avoid blowing up nice suburban areas, isn't that worthy of at least as much focused attention as all the money dumped into boondoggle War on Terror programs?