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STORY

Pipeline safety threatened by growing urban centres

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By Dina O'Meara, Calgary Herald



Canada's vast oil and gas pipeline network faces increasing risk of external hits as cities and towns grow beyond urban corridors into once rural areas.

Photographed by:

TransCanada Pipeline, TransCanada Pipeline

CALGARY — Canada needs to institute laws mandating people call before they dig, legislation which could save lives, urged an industry association.

Pipeline ruptures due to excavation hits are on the rise as urban development spreads onto formerly rural land — land criss-crossed by a network of underground oil and gas lines, the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association said Monday.

Surprisingly, there are no national or provincial laws safeguarding people and property from such accidents.

“A mandatory call-before-you dig does not exist anywhere in Canada,” said Kim McCaig, association chief operating officer. “It’s a voluntary thing in a few provinces, and in several provinces you have more than one call system.”

More than 100,000 kilometres of pipeline move oil and natural gas across Canada, through provinces and into the United States.

The association, which represents nine major pipeline corporations, noted an average of one major incident a year happens on Canadian pipelines, with ruptures caused by outside issues on the rise.

“The one thing we cannot control completely is external damage,” said president Brenda Kenny. “This is a growing risk. We see more and more near misses, we see more and more external damage and we are very, very concerned.”

More than two-thirds of external problems on pipelines are caused by third parties, such as municipal workers putting in a water main or a homeowner putting in a new fence post, she said.

Enforcement of legislation would be key making it successful, the association said.

It also wants to see a standard three-digit call number across Canada to get information and permission to dig, ideally the 811 number used in the United States.

The Canadian Common Ground Alliance believes having a standard number across Canada would encourage people to make the call before digging, noted Mike Sullivan, president of Alberta One Call.

“Damage prevention legislation would be a definite benefit to public safety and our critical-grade infrastructure

in Canada,” Sullivan said. “Having a three-digit number to dial in place in Canada and legislation in place would significantly enable having one-call centres like Alberta’s in every province and draw users to those call centres.”

The alliance, composed of companies in six provinces, will be submitting an application to the Canadian Radio and Television Commission for such a number within weeks, he said.

Alliance Pipeline, which ships natural gas from northwestern Alberta to Chicago, said both legislation and a standard call before you dig number are critical components of damage prevention currently lacking in Canada.

“The reality is that even a small nick or scrape today, which the person doing the digging may not even be aware of, could turn into a potential issue if left undetected,” spokesman Rob Gray said.

Jurisdictions south of the border adopted dig legislation a decade ago, and Canada can learn from their hiccups, said Kenny.

“You can see clearly that those with those three things in place are saving lives, compared with those who don’t have it,” she said. “We are saying in Canada we can no longer wait, we need to take stock of what has happened, learn from the types of legislation that have been proven successful in the United States and catch up quickly before there is a loss of life.”

The association also is calling for a national energy strategy which would streamline project applications. The policy would not bypass environmental or safety rules but would cut layers of bureaucracy to capture export opportunities and new markets.

“Pipelines are essential as the enabler for these outcomes,” she said. “You cannot have large energy trades that are stable safe, environmentally sound and economic over the long term without a pipeline.”

With more than \$26 trillion US in infrastructure project

“We can’t seek consensus on things that matter to this scale for the nation. We can try and engage people to the fullest extent possible, but we need to make decisions and move forward.” she said.

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