

Opening Statement – Chair Alan S. Lowenthal
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Oversight Hearing

*Impacts of Abandoned Offshore Oil and Gas Infrastructure and the Need for
Stronger Federal Oversight*

October 14, 2021

For the past few months, Congress has focused on infrastructure by debating funding for roads, bridges, local transit, the electric grid, and climate resilience.

And while finding a path forward to pass the bipartisan infrastructure bill is critical, we've neglected to discuss an essential type of infrastructure that can have devastating impacts on coastal communities.

Over the past six weeks, offshore oil and gas infrastructure – abandoned, active, and just plain old – has been the source of multiple oil leaks in the Gulf of Mexico, and an active pipeline was the source of a leak off southern California.

In late August, Hurricane Ida tore through the Gulf, killing scores of people and knocking out power, water, and communication. Residents are still recovering today.

But Ida also caused multiple offshore oil spills. Active pipelines and platforms were the sources of some spills, while abandoned ones with no identifiable party to take responsibility were the source of others.

According to reports, Ida triggered the most Gulf oil spills identified from space following a weather event since the government started tracking leaks and spills using satellites a decade ago.

We shouldn't view this as a one-off event or a freak accident.

There are thousands of oil and gas structures in the Gulf, including rigs, platforms, wellheads, power cables, and thousands of miles of pipeline, all posing environmental and safety risks.

Some of this infrastructure is active, and some is abandoned. But it's all aging and a growing concern for communities and wildlife impacted by spills and taxpayers that may be forced to pay for its eventual removal.

As climate change supercharges storms in the Gulf, more powerful winds, waves, currents, and mudslides will be a growing threat capable of moving pipelines and destroying structures.

Stronger federal regulation of this offshore infrastructure is essential to reduce future spills and other impacts and protect taxpayers from shouldering the clean-up costs.

But this isn't just a huge and growing problem in the Gulf of Mexico. As Californians have recently experienced, it's also a crisis in the Pacific.

On October 1st, residents around Newport Beach reported oily smells, and the EPA National Response Center received reports of an unknown sheen on the water's surface.

The Coast Guard confirmed a spill the next day, and since then, local, state, and federal officials and volunteers have organized a robust response to contain and clean up the spill and begin investigating the cause.

Over the past two weeks, we've learned considerable details about the San Pedro Bay Pipeline, Amplify Energy's response and the timeline of events that led to the rupture.

It appears that months ago, a ship's anchor may have hooked and dragged the pipeline over 100 feet, damaging it and causing the slash that led to the release of tens of thousands of gallons of oil.

All of this begs several questions:

Did the pipeline move or become unsecure from the seafloor, creating a hazard for commercial vessels?

Was the pipeline inspected correctly in recent years, as required, and were there indications of issues?

And was there a delay between when an alarm went off and when Amplify initiated their emergency response plan?

While these and many other questions must be answered, it will take time.

But in the interim, we need to learn more about the immediate and long-term impacts of the spill, because there are many.

Beaches and fishing spots are closed.

Local businesses, vendors, and restaurants have seen customers vanish.

And wetlands that serve as a refuge for shorebirds and other wildlife have been inundated with oil and tar balls.

As part of the spill investigation, we need to hear from residents and the surrounding communities on the ground.

That's precisely why Congresswoman Porter and I are having a joint field hearing on Monday in Southern California.

The response to the spill will continue, and conditions will eventually improve, but it's critical we don't simply move on and wait for the next accident to happen.

Offshore oil and gas infrastructure, both in the Gulf and the Pacific, is a ticking time bomb, and the California spill is part of a much larger disaster in the making.

Congress has known that offshore infrastructure poses risks to the environment and taxpayers for years.

In 2015, the Government Accountability Office alerted us that taxpayers are on the hook for billions of dollars in offshore decommissioning costs.

And in April, the GAO released a scathing report detailing the extensive failures of the Interior Department's oversight of offshore pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico.

The recent offshore spills need to be a wake-up call for Congress because without stronger regulations, things will worsen, and coastal communities and taxpayers will pay a steeper and steeper price.