



Cahaba River Society Assessment of the Colonial Pipeline Gasoline Leak September 20, 2016

The Cahaba River has very narrowly missed a potentially disastrous gasoline leak from the Colonial Pipeline in west Shelby County. According to Colonial Pipeline staff, as of September 20 the gasoline is no longer leaking and the pipeline will be flowing again by tomorrow. The leaked gasoline is reported to be 353,000 gallons, although CRS has not seen an accounting of the leaked amount that may still be in the environment. Recovery is underway.

The leak is not a threat to drinking water for the Birmingham metro area, as it is well below the part of the watershed that drains to the Birmingham Water Works intakes. We are chiefly concerned about potential groundwater contamination, and whether that could eventually threaten wells in the area and/or seep into the River. Colonial is monitoring groundwater.

We are in conversation with Colonial about their ongoing plans for regular assessment of the integrity of the pipeline and for preventative repair and replacement to ensure that the Cahaba and other area rivers are not degraded in the future.

We appreciate quick action by the Alabama Surface Mining Commission for leak detection, Colonial Pipeline for repair, and our friends at Cahaba RiverKeeper for onsite response. More info: http://www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2016/09/how_alabama_pipeline_leak_led.html

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As best we can determine, the pipeline leak occurred about 0.9 miles from the nearest bank of the Cahaba River mainstem and about 2.4 miles from where that pipeline crosses beneath the river. While that geography may seem unlucky for the Cahaba, an extremely lucky factor in this event is that the leaked gasoline drained to a strip mine pit (a.k.a., SE Twin Lake or 'Pond #2') rather than draining to Peel Creek which might have directed the flow to one of the most biologically rich segments of the Cahaba River.

The location of the assumed leak is roughly bounded on each side by remnant strip pits. As of September 20, the 'up-hill' strip pit (Pond #1) shows no signs of a gasoline sheen. The 'down-hill' strip pit (Pond #2) appears to have collected most of the 353,000 gallons of leaked gasoline. About 54,000 gallons of gasoline has been skimmed from that pond. Yet another down-slope pit (Pond #3) has shown only small amounts of gasoline degradation compounds. These observations are interpreted to mean that the spill is largely "contained" within "Pond #2". There has been no indication that Peel Creek has carried any gasoline toward the Cahaba River.

Staff with Colonial Pipeline have told us that groundwater monitoring has begun and will continue into the foreseeable future. We see that issue as the next one that will require careful attention. Colonial Pipeline staff have offered to take us on-site to discuss these issues soon.

We are grateful to the staff of the Alabama Surface Mining Commission who notice the leak and

contacted Colonial Pipeline staff. Colonial Pipeline's response has, by reliable accounts, been as vigorous as possible. Colonial Pipeline reached out to David Butler, our friend with the Cahaba RiverKeeper. David has been on-site with state and federal environmental officials. He seems convinced that Colonial Pipeline has been forthcoming and transparent about the situation and has allowed him to inspect the area thoroughly. You can read his accounts on the Cahaba RiverKeeper's facebook page.

Colonial has 5,500 miles of gasoline pipeline, of which 2,000 miles are surveyed per year by an internal traveling monitoring system that looks for leaks, flaws, and other indicators of pipe integrity. Colonial is required to designate some sections of pipeline as a "high consequence area" that receives greater scrutiny and priority for repair. Once they are beyond the emergency response CRS will work with Colonial to ensure that the Cahaba watershed crossing is designated for added attention and protection.

A video posted by [al.com](http://al.com) of a neighbor in that area suggested that drinking water sources might be at risk. Let us clarify that no surface drinking water sources are at risk in this situation. We will be assessing the potential for ground water impacts.



Colonial Pipeline Company System Map