

Tuesday 21st December 2004

Gates probe begins in mystery gas spill

Same company had 2003 accident

(December 16, 2004) — GATES — Excavations starting this week will unlock the mystery of a gasoline spill into the Erie Canal, discovered late Wednesday morning.

The spill, from an apparent break in a 10-inch underground supply line, closed off a mile of Buffalo Road, mobilized police and fire agencies from across Monroe County and interrupted CSX Transportation train service along the East Coast for more than three hours.

The pipe is owned by Buckeye Pipe Line Co., which was responsible for a gasoline spill, detected in March 2003, that leaked an estimated 50,000 gallons, affecting residences along Westfield Street in the 19th Ward and seeping into the nearby canal.

In the spill discovered Wednesday, less than a thousand gallons of fuel likely reached the canal, through a culvert just south of Buffalo Road. Unlike the previous leak, it was not located near a residential neighborhood.

"It's really a mystery to us why (the pipe) leaked," said Buckeye Pipe Line spokesman Roy R. Haase Jr. from his Pennsylvania office, where the fuel storage and transportation company is based. "We're dismayed."

Gasoline spills, harmful to aquatic life, must be reported to local health and emergency agencies, as well as to the federal National Response Center, which tracks oil spills, chemical releases, transportation accidents and pipeline spills.

"We're having a tough time in Rochester," said Haase, the company's manager of right of way and permits.

The gasoline delivery line off Buffalo Road, laid in 1965, was pressure-tested in September "at pressures far in excess of those at which it operates," he said.

The pipeline is 3 to 4 feet underground and deeper than that in the vicinity of the railroad tracks.

The spill was discovered at 11:05 a.m. by a truck driver making a routine delivery to the Hess Oil & Chemical Corp. fuel-distribution terminal on Lyell Avenue.

Buckeye personnel at the scene estimated that 4,200 gallons of gasoline could have spilled, "most of it into the ground," said Haase.

The exact amount of gasoline spilled — both into the ground and into the canal — will be determined after Buckeye excavates around the buried pipe and examines the size of the apparent break.

Just before 2 p.m. Wednesday, contractors hired by Buckeye — from Marcor of New York on Buffalo Road — were stringing a boom across the canal. The tube like linkage of absorbent material, bound in netting, is designed to soak up gasoline and other petroleum products.

Another boom was strung across the canal near Lyell Avenue and Lee Road.

Three hours after authorities were alerted, a narrow slick of gasoline was visible on the low waters of the canal near the Buffalo Road overpass, accompanied by a sharp chemical smell.

"Anything that gets into the canal is significant," said Bruce Finster, who directs the spill response team for the regional office of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The day before the spill, the delivery pipeline had 4,200 gallons in it, he confirmed at the scene, but what spilled out was probably less.

The leak into the canal was stopped quickly, said Finster, and the next step is to determine how much of the spilled fuel got into the ground.

Haase said monitoring wells will be dug at the site of the spill to determine the extent of the contamination.

Dan Cox, assistant fire chief for the Gates Fire District, was in charge of the scene.

He called the spill "unusual" for Gates but said the agencies thrown together for the emergencies performed like clockwork.

Fire personnel respond to such spills to monitor gasoline fumes and to check that there is nothing nearby that could ignite the spilled fuel.

By 2 p.m., Buffalo Road opened to traffic again; 30 minutes after that, CSX traffic was given the go-ahead to use the rail line that spans the canal.