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Rochester NY. Buckeye Pipeline. Sheen of gasoline flows along canal

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Around noon on Monday, Ric Perry set off from Lyell Avenue to jog east along the Erie Canal. Then the sharp smell of gasoline assailed him. "The closer I got to Buffalo Road," he said, "the stronger it got."

It turns out that Perry's senses were two days ahead of fire and environmental authorities, who responded Wednesday morning to reports of a gasoline spill near the canal on Buffalo Road in Gates.

On Thursday, state officials ramped up the investigation, saying the spill had started seven days earlier in an underground pipe — and that the potential amount spilled was very large: 700 barrels of gasoline and diesel fuel. That's 29,400 gallons of product, or half again more than would fit in a rail tanker.

James Hakler, Manhattan-based spokesman for the regional office of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, said the spill apparently started Dec. 8, a week before a truck driver saw gasoline pooling on the ground 200 feet from the canal.

Based on a low-level flyover Thursday in a State Police helicopter, officials say the spill affects 15 miles of the canal, from Buffalo Road west to Brockport.

From Gates to Spencerport, there are apparent pockets of pure fuel in the low water. West to Brockport, as on all of the canal affected, there's a visible glossy sheen of petroleum.

The distance the spill traveled was evident as early as mid-morning Tuesday, when Bob Minchella of Spencerport was walking his two dogs along the canal path near his home.

"The spill was visible and the smell was apparent," he said, describing the rainbow-like slick and a foamy brown muck that smelled of gasoline.

State and federal authorities are investigating the leak, which originated about four feet underground in a 10-inch fuel delivery line owned by Buckeye Pipe Line Co. of Pennsylvania.

"We're looking at everything at this point," said regional DEC chief conservation officer Capt. Steve Gerould. That includes investigating the cause and duration of the release, *what impact recent excavation on the privately owned property might have had*, and what fuel delivery records might have hinted at the leak before it was discovered.

"It's certainly possible that charges could be filed," he said.

About 10,000 gallons of both spilled gasoline and diesel fuel has been recovered near the canal so far, according to Bruce Finster, who directs the DEC's regional spills-response team.

"We don't know the exact number" of gallons that got into the waterway, he said.

Booms designed to soak up petroleum are set up along the canal at Buffalo Road, Lyell Avenue and Adams Basin. More will go up this week, Finster said, including a boom

across the canal at Long Pond Road.

"This is a very serious spill, a very serious situation," said Buckeye spokesman Roy R. Haase Jr. "We've damaged the ecosystem of the canal, which is very unfortunate."

The DEC said there was no apparent harm along the canal to fish or wildlife. But gasoline spills into water always require an emergency response, in part because of explosion hazards. On land, gasoline can contaminate soil and affect wells. Vapors, if exposures are prolonged, can cause serious illness.

Haase expressed relief that the spill happened in a light-industrial area and not near any homes.

In 2003, a Buckeye pipeline was implicated in a 50,000-gallon leak at a company terminal off Brooks Avenue. On nearby Westfield Street, 14 homes were affected by gasoline on the surface and in groundwater. Buckeye has since bought two of the homes and guaranteed the real estate value of the rest.

At the Buffalo Road spill site, where Buckeye owns only a pipeline, Haase put the amount of fuel recovered so far at about 5,000 gallons.

"Now we're in a recovery mode," he said. That means excavating the rest of the broken pipe, so that the section around the break can be tested at a metallurgy laboratory to see what happened. The section will be cut today after the pipe is filled with nitrogen gas to prevent ignition hazards.

Workers will also continue vacuuming up spilled petroleum products that have pooled on land. Cold weather was hampering that recovery effort because hoses were freezing up, Haase said.

Finster said there's a rush to clean up the spill in the canal before the water ices over.

An EPA emergency and remedial response expert, sent from the agency's Edison, N.J., office, will be on the scene today.

Haase was puzzled about the break, since the delivery line had been pressure-tested in September, ruling out corrosion.

He described the 39-year-old pipe as a low-pressure line used to shuttle fuel from a metering terminal to the delivery location, the Hess Oil & Chemical Corp. fuel-distribution terminal on Lyell Avenue.

Fuel leaking out of the broken pipe soaked into the ground. It reached the canal by way of an outfall pipe attached to an old tank used to separate oil and water. It took days for the gasoline to be noticed at ground level.

The spill site is private property and includes an old fuel terminal, unused for the last 10 years. The tanks there are empty.