

# After leaks, Cook Inlet's aging oil and gas pipelines get an unprecedented review

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[Alex DeMarban](#)

A spill-prevention group has launched an unprecedented review of Cook Inlet pipelines following leaks in recent years that alarmed regulators and raised questions about the condition of the network in the tide-swept basin. Many of the underwater pipes are more than half a century old.

"This is the first comprehensive risk assessment ever done on subsea pipelines in Cook Inlet — not for lack of trying," said Mike Munger, executive director of [Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council](#).

[The group last year](#) began working on the project with state and federal agencies, oil companies and others, after Hilcorp Alaska suffered a monthslong gas leak in an old subsea pipeline.

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Hilcorp arrived in the region in 2011, buying up used production platforms and facilities. It blamed the leak on rock abrasion and could not quickly repair it [because of winter](#) ice floes that endangered repair divers.

"This is huge for Cook Inlet," Munger said Tuesday. "We have pipelines operating since the mid-'60s in an extremely harsh environment that has limited inspection.

"If there is a significant release in Cook Inlet, especially in winter, it's very, very difficult to clean up," he said. "So we have to ensure these things operate with adequate structural integrity and are operationally sound."

The Inlet is home to 200-plus miles of pipelines crossing land and sea. Many are tied to 17 offshore platforms, most built over three years starting in 1964, before oil companies turned their attention north to the giant Prudhoe Bay oil field discovered in 1968.

[\[Legendary diver recounts Cook Inlet dangers when now-leaking gas line was installed.\]](#)

The group has hired consultant Nuka Research and Planning Group of Seldovia to conduct the review. A first step has involved mapping location and ownership of each line, and gathering methods for controlling corrosion and detecting leaks.

The project will also review pipeline integrity and result in recommendations on how to control risks to prevent future leaks, said Kristin Ryan, director of Spill Prevention and Response for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

"There is an urgency to this," Ryan said.

To support the effort, DEC is seeking \$200,000 in the proposed state capital budget, a request included in both chambers' budget versions as of Tuesday, Ryan said.

[The advisory council](#) has spent more than \$50,000 on the review so far, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough has contributed \$15,000, Munger said. The council was created by Congress after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill led to increased oversight in Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet.

Records of oil and gas infrastructure in Cook Inlet aren't always reliable, Ryan said. New operators must sometimes use old blueprints, with inadequate mapping and details, passed down between companies. In some cases, facilities were modified but changes weren't properly recorded.

An oil spill [in 2016 at the Drift River Tank Farm](#) on the west side of Cook Inlet came after Hilcorp properly followed procedures in place since long before it bought the aging terminal from Chevron in 2011. Still, oil went to an unexpected tank, causing a pipe to become overpressurized.

Some Cook Inlet pipelines are obsolete yet haven't been removed, a potential risk if they contain fluids that might leak, Ryan said.

"(There is) a general concern that the state and federal government may have lost track a bit of some of the infrastructure," she said.



Hilcorp Platform A on Sunday, April 2, 2017. (Bill Roth / ADN)

In other cases, many pipelines remain operational despite an original life expectancy of 30 years, she said.

"It's good they're still profitable, but we want to make sure we're doing things in a safe way," Ryan said.

**About this Author**

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