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By

[ELIZABETH EARL](#)

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CIRCAC, state to evaluate old pipelines in Cook Inlet

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After a turbulent spring with multiple oil and gas infrastructure failures in Cook Inlet, a citizen's advisory group and the state agency tasked with environmental protection are planning to take a look at all the aging underwater pipelines in the inlet.

The Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, an organization with a board composed of Cook Inlet-area stakeholders and agency representatives tasked with protecting the area from oil spills, plans to work with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to undertake a study of all the pipelines, many of which run along the seafloor.

The Kenai Peninsula Borough Assembly introduced an ordinance at its Tuesday meeting to allow CIRCAC to repurpose some funds from a grant the borough originally gave the group in 2001. The original grant of \$250,000 was devoted to providing financial support for a non-tank vessel contingency plan for pollution prevention in Cook Inlet and other related activities, according to a memo from Borough Finance Director Craig Chapman to the assembly.

“Of that original appropriation, \$15,494 remains unspent,” the memo states. “This ordinance would authorize those remaining funds to be used to prepare a report on the current status of underwater aging pipelines in Cook Inlet in coordination with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.”

The worn infrastructure in Cook Inlet gained national media attention in February when [a natural gas leak was reported](#) from a pipeline operated by Hilcorp Alaska that supplied gas to the company's Middle Ground Shoal oil platforms.

The company has since clamped off the line on the natural gas leak and [identified a 3 foot by 10 foot boulder](#) as the cause of the hole in the line, which measured approximately 3/16 inch wide by 3/8 inch long, according to an April 17 situation report released by DEC.

“Dive boat operators confirmed the cessation of bubbles after the clamp was installed on April 13,” the report states.

On April 1, Hilcorp also [reported an oil sheen near its Anna Platform](#) in a separate incident. Upon investigation, the spill appeared to be less than three gallons of crude oil, but the company [is still investigating the cause](#). On April 3, the company emptied a gas line on its Steelhead Platform in yet another separate incident of a suspected gas leak.

The project comes at Walker's direction, who directed DEC to prioritize the problems with Cook Inlet's aging pipelines. Homer-based conservation nonprofit Cook Inletkeeper, which initially threatened to sue Hilcorp over the natural gas leak but has since dropped plans to sue, wrote a letter to Walker dated April 7 asking for an audit of the infrastructure in Cook Inlet and a review of the bonding and surety levels to ensure companies are adequately funding the decommissioning, removal and remediation of old infrastructure.

"After what we've experienced the past few months — and what we know about the effects of Cook Inlet's unforgiving forces on pipelines and other facilities — it's clear we must address the issue of aging infrastructure in Cook Inlet if we hope to continue any semblance of responsible development," the letter states.

CIRCAC also expressed frustration and concern over multiple spills in the inlet area in 2016. In its annual report, the organization called the series of spills in the inlet as "warnings that we cannot be complacent about Cook Inlet's risks and challenges."

CIRCAC provides advice and recommendations on a variety of oil industry activities in its coverage area, one of which is risk assessments. The organization has had an ongoing effort to evaluate infrastructure since before the spills were reported, said Lynda Giguere, the director of public outreach for CIRCAC. The organization is still working on what the details of this report may be, she said.

"We're still scoping out what that bigger project is going to look like," she said. "We want to know what's working, what's not working, what needs to be fixed. That's where we're starting."

Cook Inlet is a highly dynamic environment [with multiple risk](#) factors, Giguere said. As in the case of Hilcorp's natural gas leak, scouring or impacts from boulders can perforate lines; Alaska's climate in the winter, with thick sea ice, can make [spill response a challenge](#), both in moving equipment and recovering oil from the ice; and depending on where the spill is located, transportation to and from the site can be challenging as well.

Most of Cook Inlet's oil and gas infrastructure was built in the 1960s. The pipeline to the Middle Ground Shoal platforms was built in 1964 and formerly carried crude oil. The Anna Platform was built in 1965, and the Steelhead Platform was installed in 1986.

Age is only one of the components of risk, though, Giguere said. Other operators in the inlet, including BlueCrest Energy near Anchor Point and Furie Operating Alaska in the Kitchen Lights Unit northwest of Nikiski, may have an interest despite having newer installations because of the lessons learned for avoiding spills, she said.

“We always look at this to improve safety,” she said. “The more you know about the risks, the more you can prevent future incidents from happening. Our focus has always been largely based on prevention. The more knowledge you have, the better you can prepare, the better you can prevent future spills.”

The borough assembly is scheduled to hear the ordinance authorizing the use of the grant funds at its May 2 meeting.

Reach Elizabeth Earl at elizabeth.earl@peninsulaclarion.com.