

A preventable oil spill in Kansas

Fossil fuel companies aren't promoting sustainability. They can't even be trusted to take baseline safety measures.

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The area impacted by the pipeline rupture and subsequent oil discharge into Mill Creek near Washington, Kansas. (US Environmental Protection Agency)

In December, a leak was detected in a section of the Keystone Pipeline located near the Kansas-Nebraska border. Eventually, 588,000 gallons of toxic tar sands oil—almost an Olympic swimming pool's worth—spilled into Kansas's Mill Creek and onto surrounding farmland.

It was the largest oil spill in the pipeline's 13-year history—larger than the previous 22 spills combined. And it could have been prevented.

According to a government-mandated investigation into the cause of the spill, TC Energy, the Canadian company that owns the Keystone Pipeline, knew this section of the pipeline was defective. In fact, in 2013 TC Energy dug it up because it was

warped. Yet instead of making any repairs, the company reburied the pipeline and had inspectors retrofit their tools to work around the warping.

In a report published in April, RSI Pipeline Solutions, the third-party consultant hired to carry out the investigation, attributed the root cause of the oil spill to “gaps in company standards, policies, and administrative controls,” as well as “lapses in construction oversight and quality control.”

TC Energy did not respond to RSI’s report beyond a statement to local media noting that the company was still evaluating how it would implement the report’s recommendations.

In recent years, fossil fuel companies—TC Energy among them—have tried to rebrand themselves as energy visionaries focused on sustainable new investments and practices. In reality, they have shown that they cannot even be trusted to take baseline safety measures with fossil fuels. Meanwhile, according to industry watchdogs, these same companies spend millions each year suppressing negative information about fracking and pressuring lawmakers to quickly green-light more pipeline projects.

TC Energy, after supporting a successful 2022 campaign to halt further research into the environmental effects of pipelines in the United States, is currently building 74 miles of new pipeline in Western Canada. In a press release announcing the \$1.3 billion project, TC Energy said its work was guided by “core values of safety, responsibility, collaboration and integrity.”

But having integrity means being honest. If fossil fuel companies want to prove their trustworthiness, they can start by taking responsibility for the way their reckless pursuit of profit has caused real harm. And then they can start making real, substantive changes to their business practices.

The pervasive narrative today is that it’s up to individuals to counter climate change. In order to save the planet, you need to consume less and do more. Switch to an electric vehicle, install some solar panels, aim for a zero-waste home.

These are commendable actions. But the fact remains that individual choices cannot take on the enormity of the climate crisis. There must be accountability at the industrial level. The corporations whose large-scale operations supply the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the energy that powers our homes and schools and

churches—they have to do their part.

And it's clear that many of them are not.