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Senator Feinstein Testifies at Hearing on Pipeline Safety

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) testified today on legislation introduced with Senator Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) designed to strengthen oversight of the nation’s pipelines and increase penalties for violations of federal pipeline safety regulations.

The legislation follows the September 9 natural gas explosion in San Bruno that killed eight people, injured dozens more, and destroyed or damaged 55 homes.

Following are Senator Feinstein’s remarks, prepared for delivery before the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, and Security:

“Good afternoon Chairman Lautenberg, Ranking Member Thune, and other members of the Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on this very important legislation.

On September 9th, at 6:11 p.m., a natural gas pipeline in San Bruno, California, just south of San Francisco, exploded, turning a quiet residential area into something resembling a war zone.

The blast in the Crestmoor neighborhood shook the ground like an earthquake.

The first reports suggested it was a plane crash, as the blast site was only two miles from San Francisco International Airport. But as the fire raged on it became clear that something was fueling it.

Firefighters were powerless, as the water main in the area had been burst in the blast. CalFire helicopters were brought in.

The inferno burned for one hour and twenty-nine minutes before the gas to the 30-inch transmission pipe could be turned off at two different locations.

One of the valves was 1 mile from the blast, and another was 1.5 miles away.

They were both in secured locations. To shut each valve, a worker needed to drive through rush hour traffic, use a key to get into the area, and attach a handle to the valve to crank it.

It took more than five hours to turn off the gas distribution pipelines to the homes on fire.

The blaze damaged or destroyed 55 homes, injured 66, and killed eight people. It consumed 15 acres.

The next day I called the National Transportation Safety Board Chair. Two days later, I visited San Bruno. I walked through the devastation with Christopher Hart, vice chairman of the NTSB.

I saw homes and cars totally incinerated. It was like a bomb had struck.

The sections of pipeline that exploded – now a key part of the investigation – appeared to have ripped apart along longitudinal and circular welds, now 60 years old.

A gaping crater demonstrated the size of the initial blast.

This crater was located at the low point in the valley, where the street and pipeline, that ran down the middle of the street, dipped and rose.

This tragedy shows the heavy toll, in death and destruction, when high pressure natural gas pipelines fail. The risk is unacceptably high.

So last week I joined with my colleague, Senator Barbara Boxer, to introduce the Strengthening Pipeline Safety and Enforcement Act of 2010.

This bill strengthens and expands legislation proposed by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. The legislation:

- Doubles the number of Federal pipeline safety inspectors. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration currently has 100 pipeline inspectors, responsible for 217,306 miles of interstate pipeline. Each inspector is responsible for 2,173 miles of pipeline – the distance from San Francisco to Chicago. NTSB has recently recommended that inspectors “must establish an aggressive oversight program that thoroughly examines each operator’s decision-making process.” Doubling the number of inspectors will make this possible.

- Requires deployment of electronic valves capable of automatically shutting off the gas in a fire or other emergency. Manual operated valves must be located, accessed, and physically turn off in an emergency. Automatic valves could dramatically reduce damage caused by a pipeline breach.
- Mandates inspections by “smart pigs,” or the use of an inspection method certified by the Secretary of Transportation as equally effective at finding corrosion. Accident statistics over the past decade identify corrosion as the leading cause of all reported pipeline accidents.
- Prohibits natural gas pipelines from operating at high pressure if they cannot be inspected using the most effective inspection technology. This precautionary approach to pipeline operations assures that pipelines more likely to have undetected problems are operated at lower risk.
- Prioritizes old pipelines in seismic areas for the highest level of safety oversight. Today, regulators consider a pipeline’s proximity to homes and buildings. Other risk factors are not a defining consideration, even though pipe age and seismicity have a clear impact on the risk of a catastrophic incident.
- Directs the Department of Transportation to set standards for natural gas leak detection equipment and methods. Today there are no uniform national standards for how to detect leaks.

Finally, the legislation adopts a number of common-sense provisions proposed by Secretary LaHood to improve pipeline safety, including:

- Increasing civil penalties for safety violations;
- Expanding data collection to be included in the national pipeline mapping system;
- Closing jurisdictional loopholes to assure greater oversight of unregulated pipelines; and
- Requiring consideration of a firm’s safety record when considering its request for regulatory waivers.

Senator Boxer and I introduced this legislation in order to initiate quick action to make our pipeline system safer.

We have put forward our best ideas to improve inspection, address old pipes, and advance modern safety technology. We hope to improve these ideas as new information comes forward about the San Bruno tragedy.

We look forward to working with the Senate Commerce Committee to move and improve this legislation expeditiously. Thank you Mr. Chairman.”

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