



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

---

---

**Date:**

**In reply refer to:** P-98-24

Mr. Grant O. Reed  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
LaRoche Industries, Inc.  
1100 Johnson Ferry Road, N.E.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30342

---

---

On May 23, 1996, a 68-mile-long, 20-inch-diameter steel pipeline owned by Marathon Pipe Line Company ruptured at a location near Gramercy, Louisiana. The rupture went undetected by the pipeline controller for about 1 hour. The ruptured pipeline ultimately released about 475,000 gallons of gasoline into a common pipeline right-of-way within a designated "wetland." Gasoline also entered the Blind River, causing environmental damage and killing fish, wildlife, and vegetation in the area.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the accident was damage done to the Marathon pipeline during excavations of a nearby pipeline operated by LaRoche Industries, Inc. The damaged pipeline was the result of the failure of LaRoche either to take adequate measures to ensure that excavations performed under its supervision did not damage underground utilities or to notify Marathon that those excavations may have damaged the Marathon pipeline. Contributing to the severity of the accident was Marathon's delay in recognizing the rupture, which delayed shutting down the pipeline and isolating the rupture.

Investigation of the rupture site revealed an approximate 200- by 100-foot excavation area that extended over the Marathon pipeline and included the rupture site. Safety Board investigators found a longitudinal crack approximately 53 inches long near the top of the pipe. In the vicinity of the crack were multiple dents, scrapes, and gouges that were consistent with damage that would be made by a backhoe or similar digging tool.

In September and October 1995, LaRoche supervised excavation of its 8-inch pipeline, which was located about 30 feet from the Marathon pipeline. The investigation revealed that neither LaRoche nor its excavation contractor used the Louisiana One Call system before beginning work at the site of the eventual rupture. Nor was any evidence found to indicate that LaRoche or its excavation contractor made any attempt to coordinate the excavation activities with Marathon or any of the other operators with pipelines in the vicinity of the excavation near

the rupture site. According to officials from the excavation contractor, the equipment operators were told by LaRoche superintendents that no pipelines were located in the area of the Marathon pipeline. A LaRoche superintendent who supervised the excavation stated that when the excavation work was completed, the excavation crew did not fill in the excavated area.

The investigation revealed that no excavation other than that performed by LaRoche had been done in the area of the rupture since at least May 1990. This, in combination with the information above, led the Safety Board to conclude that the damage that was found on the pipeline and that was determined to have caused the rupture had occurred during the 1995 LaRoche excavation.

The Safety Board is concerned that neither LaRoche nor its excavation contractor used the Louisiana One Call system before beginning work in the area of the Marathon pipeline. Of equal concern to the Safety Board was the failure of LaRoche to take any action or make any notification when its excavation work encountered and damaged the pipeline. Based on the extent and nature of the damage, the Safety Board does not believe it reasonable that those individuals engaged in the excavation were unaware that their equipment had struck the pipeline. Despite the nature of the damage and its potential for causing the pipeline to fail, LaRoche personnel who were supervising the excavation made no effort to identify and notify the pipeline owner so that the damage could be assessed and possible corrective measures taken. Had LaRoche supervisors notified Marathon that its pipeline may have been damaged, repairs or replacements could have been made that would have prevented this accident.

LaRoche, in April 1998, implemented a written policy for repairing its 8-inch pipeline that includes requirements to notify the Louisiana One Call system before beginning excavations. LaRoche has told the Safety Board that all its future excavations will be preceded by notification of the Louisiana One Call system. The Safety Board notes LaRoche's efforts to address this issue; however, as noted previously, another serious issue in this accident involves LaRoche employees' actions, or inaction, during the course of and after completing the excavation work.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board makes the following safety recommendation to LaRoche Industries, Inc.:

Establish and implement comprehensive written excavation procedures to ensure that, if suspected damage to a facility occurs during excavation, all relevant authorities or entities are notified so that the situation can be evaluated and any corrective actions needed can be undertaken promptly. (P-98-24)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations P-98-21 through -23 to Marathon Ashland Pipe Line LLC.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with

respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation P-98-24 in your reply. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6469.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in this recommendation.

By: Jim Hall  
Chairman