

Hearing on Pipeline Security Requested

Today, Gus sent a letter to Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), Chair of the Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, to request a hearing on pipeline security.

The hearing request has come in the wake of an act of vandalism to a 30-mile-long anhydrous ammonia pipeline in Hillsborough County on Nov. 13. Three teenage boys had drilled a hole into the pipeline in an alleged search for money. This sprang a leak in the pipeline, causing the release of a noxious chemical cloud and the evacuation of thousands of local residents.

In the letter to Jackson-Lee, Bilirakis states his case for the need to have Congressional review over this issue of pipeline security.

"I found the response from both the Department of Transportation - which is charged with pipeline safety - and the Department of Homeland Security - which is charge with pipeline security - very troubling.

"Media reports indicated that both agencies failed to provide clear explanations about which agency should be responsible for an incident of this nature and whether pipeline security requirements are adequate to stop acts of vandalism such as this, or worse, deliberate acts of terrorism against pipelines, which federal warnings about Al Qaeda have specifically mentioned as terrorist targets.

"...I believe that this incident should be a wake-up call about the potential vulnerabilities of our nation's critical pipeline infrastructure and federal procedures for ensuring their security. It also highlights some very serious issues that I believe our Subcommittee should examine. Therefore, I urge you to hold a Subcommittee hearing to highlight the aforementioned issues and ensure that federal pipeline security efforts are as sensible and robust as they should be."

The St. Pete Times had reported about the confusion on the federal government level about where the responsibility for pipeline security lies.

Meanwhile, it remains unclear who in government -- if anyone -- is in charge of safeguarding the nation's lines.

Government officials said the brunt of the task falls to the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, but a spokeswoman said the TSA has neither the staff nor authority to make sure every pipeline owner prevents the possibility of tampering.

"Do we have regulations? No, we don't," said Sari Koshetz of the TSA. "There are guidelines, there are expectations."

Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, said that may need to change. He called for a quick response from the head of TSA about security conditions here.

St. Pete Times writer Thomas Lake described a frustrating narrative in an attempt to get an answer to the question of, who is in charge when it comes to securing and making safe our nation's pipelines.

The pipeline is operated by Tampa Pipeline Corp. and managed by a man named Glenn Howell. On Tuesday, I asked Howell why no one had done anything to keep meddlers away from that 8-foot section.

"There's no requirements for it," he said.

This surprised me, given the way we've changed since the towers fell. In a nation where we're told to remove our shoes before boarding a plane, could the security mavens in the federal government really have no requirements for safeguarding pipelines full of poison?

It was time to find out. Through some Internet research, I discovered that the U.S. Department of Transportation has a sub-section whose name suggests it would be responsible for such things. It's the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

I called up their press office, and near the end of the day a spokesman called back. His name was Damon Hill.

Do you have any regulations on pipeline security? I asked.

"We don't have any security regulations in our regulation book," he said. "That's now handled by the Transportation Security Administration."

All right. I dialed up the TSA and found a spokeswoman by the name of Sari Koshetz. I asked her about pipeline security with regard to the recent unpleasantness on the river.

"This week was a safety issue," she said, "not a security issue."

Really? So better security - or any at all - wouldn't have stopped the boy with the drill?

"There was no nexus of terrorism," she said. "Do we have regulations? No, we don't. There are guidelines, there are expectations."

Expectations?

"It's up to the private company to maintain a security plan," she said.

I think you get the picture. But, if you want some more, you can view the rest of his column here. The bottom line is that this confusion and concern over safety clearly is something Congress should take a look at.