

**Pipeline Safety Is A Priority at the Texas Railroad Commission**  
By Rich Varela, Executive Director, Railroad Commission of Texas

Texas has more than 200,000 miles of intrastate pipeline—more intrastate pipeline than any other state in the nation. And the number one cause of pipeline accidents in this state is homeowners, contractors, or city employees digging near or into a pipeline and damaging it. The industry calls this third-party damage, and on average it happens nearly 200 times every week in Texas.

Contrary to these facts, a recent media outlet report would like North Texans to believe they are in danger because of three accidents over the last year, that were the result of several factors, including the separation of a pipe linkage part known as a compression coupling. In two of these three incidents, the results were unfortunate and deadly. Let me be clear that the Railroad Commission—which regulates intrastate natural gas, hazardous liquid and crude oil pipelines—regards all accidents from all causes very seriously.

In fact, the three Railroad Commissioners take their role—which is essentially as judge and jury when a major accident occurs—so seriously, they have declined requests for on-camera interviews about these accidents. Just as a judge and jury may not discuss a case with the media, the Commissioners—which rule on enforcement actions if evidence from an accident warrants it—may not discuss accidents with reporters.

Each of these three accidents involved a unique set of factors that led up to natural gas leaking and then igniting. Also, the type of pipe and compression coupling components involved in each accident was different. Regardless, we decided to take a closer look at the one common thread in these accidents—compression couplings. That’s why we initiated a survey last spring asking all of the state’s natural gas companies to tell us about the types of compression couplings they have installed (there are dozens of different compression coupling types) and any failures associated with these fixtures. In fact, I’m proud to say that Texas has taken the lead in this survey, which is the first of its kind in the nation. Additionally, Texas has been selected to participate on the federal Office of Pipeline Safety’s Plastic Pipe Ad Hoc Advisory group. The Commission will be able to share information learned from both our current survey of compression couplings involving plastic pipe and our existing data regarding plastic pipe installations.

Furthermore, our Safety Division began reviewing past accident records to determine if there has been a pattern of pipe separations contributing to other incidents. The Division also began a search of federal notices and National Transportation Safety Board reports to see if they could find other incidents around the nation involving these types of pipeline fixtures. Staff also met this summer with several pipeline companies to observe firsthand how they are conducting their leak surveys and repairs.

This is an exhaustive and comprehensive process that takes time. We are examining whether evidence exists of a systematic failure that could require the replacement of specific types of fittings statewide. Shortly, we hope to have some answers. In the interim, on Oct. 9, the Commissioners issued a directive to all Texas natural gas companies on the specific steps to take

when making repairs or replacements to certain, specific compression couplings during pipeline maintenance jobs and leak surveys.

As in any accident, numerous factors lead up to the final incident. For instance, when auto accidents occur, one accident could be the result of speeding, while another could be the result of wet weather, and another a tire blowout or a combination of these factors. Frankly, the WFAA report has done the public a disservice in jumping to the conclusion—based on three dissimilar pipeline accidents—that all non-restraint compression couplings may fail and therefore need to be replaced.

So what is the Railroad Commission doing about the top cause—third party damage— of pipeline accidents in Texas? As of Sept. 1, pipeline operators and those who dig around pipelines must begin to follow specific best management practices or face—for the first time in Texas—fines and penalties for not doing so. Since Sept. 1, almost 1,400 reports have been filed on the Commission’s online damage-reporting database. We take our pipeline safety responsibilities seriously at the Railroad Commission, and our extensive safety record demonstrates this. As it has since assuming responsibility over intrastate pipelines in 1971, I assure you that the Commission will continue to provide Texans with one of the top safety pipeline regulatory programs in the nation.