



M O V I N G T H E
**AMERICAN
ECONOMY**

U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.
www.dot.gov/affairs/briefing.htm

News

PHMSA 4-05
Thursday, December 29, 2005

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Federal Pipeline Safety Agency Proposes Stiff Fine Against Oklahoma Operator for Safety Violations in a Virginia Incident

The U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) today proposed a \$600,000 fine against Williams Gas Pipeline-Transco of Tulsa, OK for federal pipeline safety violations resulting in the release of natural gas and the evacuation of over 850 school children and other residents in a heavily populated northern Virginia neighborhood.

Today's action follows PHMSA's investigation of an Oct. 3, 2005 incident in Chantilly, VA, in which Williams' workers struck the company's own 36-inch natural gas pipeline during maintenance operations.

"Our investigation into this incident identified safety procedure lapses which operators must prevent," said PHMSA Acting Administrator Brigham A. McCown. "The action we are taking is aggressive, and meant to underscore the importance of safe excavations and proper operator qualifications."

During the investigation, PHMSA's inspectors determined Williams failed to properly locate its underground pipelines for digging or excavation activities; failed to ensure personnel performing covered tasks were appropriately qualified; did not follow written procedures for conducting operations and maintenance activities; and neglected to provide proper pipeline records – including construction maps – to appropriate personnel.

The agency cited Williams with a notice of probable violation outlining each of the specific violations discovered during the investigation.

The proposed fine demonstrates PHMSA's stepped-up effort to improve operator safety performance and promote compliance, McCown said. He added that his agency is considering tougher requirements for all operator qualifications as a result of the Chantilly and other incidents.

As part of its response, McCown said that Williams will be required to conduct its own investigation to determine the cause of the incident and implement a plan to improve future investigation and excavation processes. PHMSA is also issuing an advisory bulletin to operators outlining existing federal requirements to follow when conducting excavation activities.

"Operators must be reminded that they are their own first line of defense in preventing damage to underground utilities and protecting the public and that anything less will not be tolerated," McCown said.

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