

Louisiana

'Wake-up call': pipeline leak exposes carbon capture safety gaps, advocates say

Estimated 2,548 barrels of carbon dioxide leaked from Exxon pipeline in Louisiana on 3 April, triggering alarm among residents



📷 An Exxon gas station in 2020. Photograph: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Nina Lakhani in Sulphur, Louisiana

Fri 19 Apr 2024 06.00 EDT

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**LO #10 – 5/24/24
PU-22-391**

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686 PU-22-391 Filed: 7/1/2024 Pages: 12
LO Exhibit LO-10 - The Guardian Article - Wake-Up
Call...Dated 04/19/24 (Dkt. #574)

A major leak of CO₂ from an ExxonMobil pipeline in **Louisiana** exposes dangerous safety gaps that should halt the planned multibillion-dollar carbon capture industry, environmental advocates say.

An estimated 2,548 barrels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) leaked from the Exxon pipeline in Sulphur in Calcasieu parish on 3 April, triggering an emergency response and alarm among residents who live in close proximity to scores of polluting pipelines, petrochemical and fossil fuel facilities.

It took more than two hours to fix the leak, which is “unacceptable”, according to Kenneth Clarkson from the Pipeline Safety Trust non-profit.

“Any release of this size of carbon dioxide should be taken seriously, especially given the proximity to homes in Sulphur ... The operator should have promptly known about the leak from the pressure loss and quickly closed the valves and, as reported, they failed to do that,” said Clarkson.

“There are dangerous gaps in the federal regulations that we hope will be addressed.”

CO₂ - a greenhouse gas released by burning fossil fuels - is an asphyxiant and intoxicant, which in large quantities can cause injury or death by replacing oxygen in the air. Potent clouds of CO₂ can hang in the air for hours, depending on the weather conditions.

About 5,000 miles of CO₂ pipelines are currently operating in the US, which are predominantly for transporting the gas to oilfields where it is used to extract hard-to-reach oil - a process known as enhanced oil recovery. The pipeline running through Sulphur is part of a network stretching more than 900 miles through Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi, which ExxonMobile acquired from Denbury last year.

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📷 A pump station in Louisiana where a leak occurred. Photograph: James Hiatt

Interviews by the Guardian suggest that no pipeline operator was on site at the pump station where the leak occurred - and the camera monitoring the facility was not working. Exxon staff located 50 miles away in Beaumont, Texas, learned about the leak after it was reported to emergency services, the Guardian understands. It took more than two hours for an operator to arrive at the facility and fix the leak, [according to the local fire department](#).

Earlier this week, the Guardian observed contractors carrying out anti-corrosion maintenance work at the pump station, where a significant leak was previously reported in 2011.



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Holly McGee, whose family lives opposite the pump station, said she reported the leak to the sheriff's office around 6pm on 3 April - after calls to the company went unanswered. Photographs and video seen by the Guardian show a dense white gas gushing out vertically and horizontally from the pipeline. According to McGee, the leak sounded like a pressure cooker, and smelt like chemicals.

"This wasn't like the usual gas release that we see from time to time, this went on for a long time. I knew we should leave," said McGee, who evacuated to her grandparents home two streets away where they could still hear the CO₂ leaking. "If it had not been so windy, it could have been worse. We know what happened in Mississippi ... I am more vigilant now."

In 2020, almost 50 residents required hospital treatment after the Denbury (now Exxon) **pipeline ruptured in Satartia, Mississippi**, releasing 31,000 barrels of CO₂. The incident exposed major flaws in the existing health and safety regulations for CO₂ pipelines, which as a result are currently being updated by the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). The update is already facing delays, and could take years.

Yet the CO₂ pipeline network is forecast to grow as much as tenfold thanks in part to billions of dollars of tax incentives in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act - as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in direct investment for CO₂ transport and storage infrastructure. The Biden administration is counting on CCS to meet its climate goals - **despite compelling evidence** that the technology is inefficient and will probably prolong the use of fossil fuels.

The Sulphur incident should raise "alarm bells" in Louisiana, where the oil and gas industry is backing political efforts to fast-track the construction of CO₂ pipelines and carbon capture and storage, according to Monique Harden, director of law and public policy at the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice.

“Exxon and all the other folks marching forward blindly without adequate regulations and protections are putting all of us at risk. We can expect more CO₂ disasters in communities with plans for more gas plants, CO₂ pipelines and underground injection of CO₂ waste,” said Harden.

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An ExxonMobile spokesperson said: “We’ve completed repairs to the pump station and continue with our investigation of the incident.”

Exxon is required to submit an incident report to PHMSA, a federal agency within the US Department of Transportation, within 30 days. PHMSA is responsible for investigations into the root cause and any compliance issues, but is not obliged to publish its findings.

Thanks to the windy dry conditions, the leaked CO₂ in Sulphur appears to have dispersed without causing any harm to humans or animals. But residents, who are frequently subjected to leaks and other major incidents at the polluting industrial plants, fear that this was down to luck.

A shelter-in-place order - not an evacuation order - was issued for residents within a 0.25-mile radius of the leak and the road closed off for several hours, news of which circulated on social media and a local news channel.

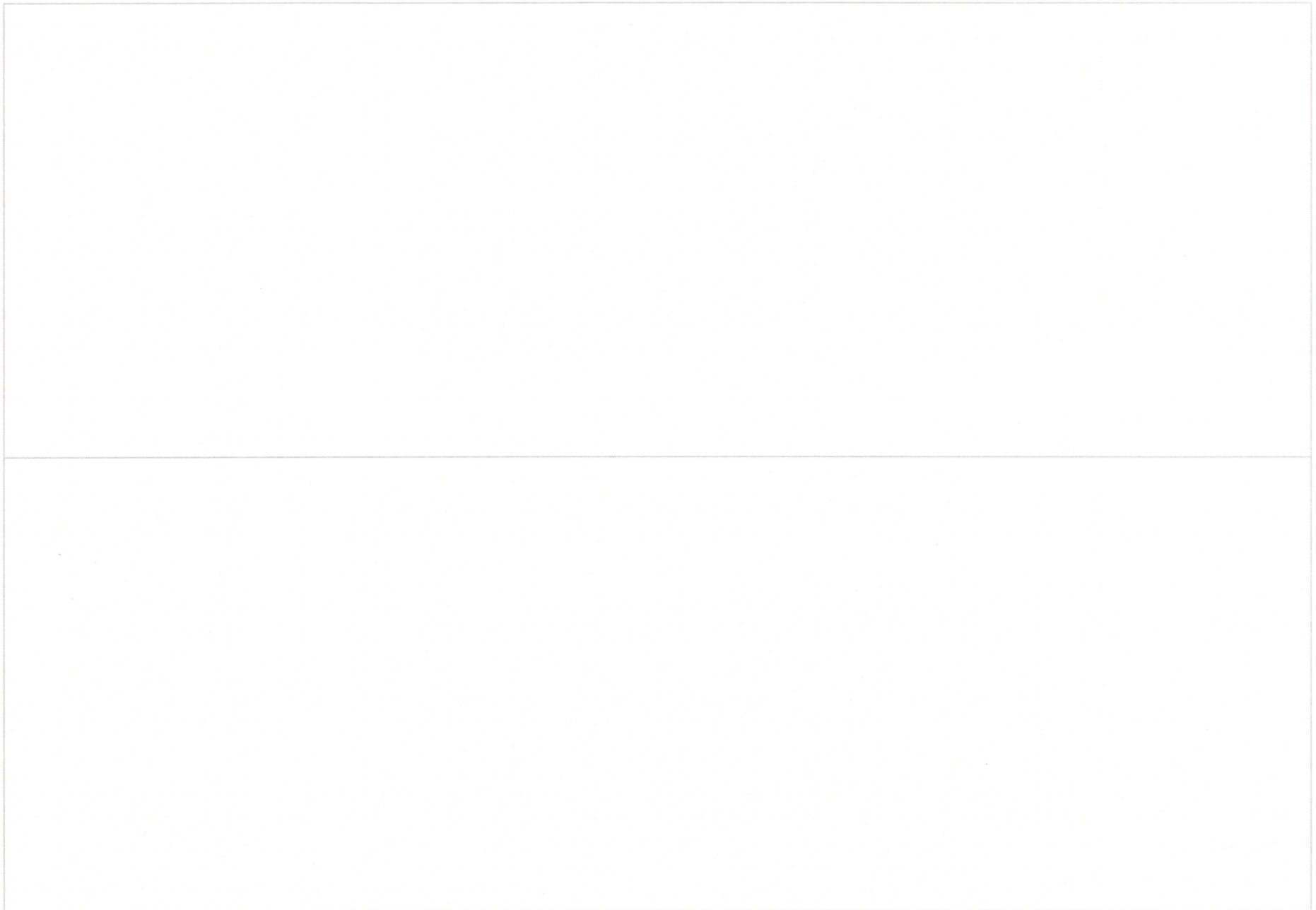
"I only found out about the leak after the shelter-in-place order was lifted. There should have been an emergency alert for the whole parish, we should have been evacuated, but we don't have good regulations. I went to bed and had nightmares," said Cindy Roberston, a community organiser in Sulphur.

"We are already living with PTSD from all the industrial plants. Now they want to add CCS, which makes absolutely no sense for the climate or public health," Robertson added.

"This should be a wake-up call, carbon dioxide is corrosive and an asphyxiant, it's a huge risk and we're not prepared for CCS," said James Hiatt, a local environmental justice campaigner and former oil refinery technician.

"The CO₂ and oxygen levels were continuously monitored and did not pose a risk to the residents close to the plant. If life was endangered, we would have evacuated," a firefighter who attended the incident said.

The Calcasieu parish office of homeland security and emergency preparedness, which is responsible for local disaster planning and response, did not respond to the Guardian.



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