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Alyeska can't skimp on pipeline integrity and safety

by Rep. David Guttenberg

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Community Perspective

There they go again, another spill and more bad decisions.

With the recent spill at Pump Station 9 on the trans-Alaska pipeline system (TAPS) and oil flowing uncontrolled into the Gulf of Mexico since April, now is not the time for Alyeska to skimp on pipeline safety or spill prevention. Yet that is exactly what some Alyeska employees fear the company is doing with its plans to transfer certain personnel from Fairbanks to Anchorage this June.

Alyeska claims the transfers will save money. Even if those savings pan out, and there are good reasons to believe they won't, the risks to Alaskans' safety and economy far outweigh any potential short-term savings.

Pump Station 9 is 110 miles from Fairbanks and more than 300 miles from Anchorage. The spill forced producers to slow production to 8 percent of normal to avoid overflowing backup tanks upstream. At this rate, those tanks can only hold about

72 hours of oil. Every hour responders spend driving those extra 200 miles costs Alaska money in lost production.

Spills happen. Alyeska must be prepared to address them quickly and effectively. The recent spill occurred during scheduled maintenance. In 2007, a fire during a similar routine at Pump Station 9 forced an extended shutdown. There have been others. Some accidents could have been avoided with better procedures and attention to protocols. Some, like an intoxicated man shooting a hole in the line in 2001, cannot be prevented. No matter the causes, as the more than 30-year-old line continues to age, preventing and addressing situations like these will require even closer attention.

Several Alyeska employees have told me the 30 engineers, scientists and technicians proposed for transfer are critical to monitoring and maintaining the integrity, safety and environmental compliance of TAPS. These integral personnel can quickly reach potential problem spots along the line from Fairbanks because it is centrally located to the TAPS right-of-way. Transferring these employees hundreds of miles from the pipe they are responsible for will significantly reduce the company's ability to prevent and respond to unpredictable situations.

Some damage from Alyeska's proposed personnel move has already been done. Seven of the above personnel primarily responsible for integrity management of the pipeline have recently left Alyeska, taken other positions in Fairbanks, or are scheduled to leave Alyeska soon to avoid moving to Anchorage. Workplace morale has nose-dived since Alyeska accelerated the moves to take place in June. It will take considerable time and expense to replace these employees, their

experience and institutional knowledge, and the losses will add a significant burden to the remaining staff.

Alyeska has a peppered but generally commendable safety and maintenance record, but when it comes to safety and spill prevention, the company with a controlling interest in Alyeska, BP, has a regrettable history.

Residents of the Gulf states are living with the fallout from BP's latest and largest spill, and Alaskans are still recovering from the Exxon Valdez disaster. BP's cavalier ways of pinching pennies in the wrong places again cost Alaskans with a series of North Slope spills in 2003, 2006 and 2009.

BP's efforts to cut costs have led to costly cleanups and hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue to the state. Although centralizing employees in Anchorage might seem like a good move for this year's bottom line, these are the employees who keep small incidents from snowballing into major disasters. When accidents happen, and they will, Alaskans cannot afford to have these professionals anywhere but in the best position for immediate action.

The spill at Pump Station 9 and the ongoing disaster in the Gulf should be reminders that contingency preparedness is not only a worthwhile investment but also a responsibility to Alaska and its people. In 1997, then Alyeska President Bob Malone moved employees based in Anchorage to Fairbanks saying: "We are evolving into a new structure that will increase our safety and enhance our environmental reliability."

He was right then and he's right now.

Rep. David Guttenberg is a Democrat representing Fairbanks in the Alaska Legislature.

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