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PIPELINES: Number of leaks and spills continued to grow in 2015

Mike Lee, E&E reporter

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The number of pipeline leaks and spills rose to a five-year high last year, although there was a decline in serious accidents.

Across all types of pipelines, there were 709 reportable incidents in 2015, up from 701 the previous year and a 20 percent increase over 2011, according to statistics from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

There were 326 breaches that involved injuries, deaths or sizable spills, which the Department of Transportation classifies as "significant incidents." That's also a five-year high and a 13 percent increase over 2011. PHMSA is part of DOT.

Pipeline industry groups say they have gotten better at avoiding large spills and leaks and that more of the spills are being confined to their own property.

| Year | Oil/ liquids | Gas transmission | Gas gathering | Gas distribution | LNG | Total |
|------|--------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|-----|-------|
| 2011 | 140 | 84 | 6 | 58 | 0 | 288 |
| 2012 | 132 | 62 | 7 | 52 | 0 | 253 |
| 2013 | 166 | 71 | 6 | 61 | 0 | 304 |
| 2014 | 153 | 76 | 9 | 63 | 2 | 303 |
| 2015 | 180 | 76 | 4 | 66 | 0 | 326 |

Statistics from the U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration show the number of pipeline leaks and spills hit a five-year high in 2015, although the number of serious incidents declined. Source: PHMSA

"Our primary safety efforts are addressing larger incidents impacting the public or environment," John Stoodly, vice president of the Association of Oil Pipe Lines, said in an email.

Carl Weimer, executive director of the Pipeline Safety Trust, said the industry could improve its record. While the number of major spills is down, for instance, the amount of oil spilled hasn't fallen.

| Year | Total incidents | Significant incidents | Serious incidents | Deaths | Injuries |
|------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------|----------|
| 2011 | 592 | 288 | 32 | 14 | 56 |

"While the industry loves to point out that 99.999 percent of product moves through

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PIPELINES

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|------|-----|-----|----|----|----|
| 2012 | 573 | 253 | 28 | 12 | 57 |
| 2013 | 619 | 304 | 24 | 9 | 44 |
| 2014 | 701 | 303 | 28 | 19 | 96 |
| 2015 | 709 | 326 | 28 | 12 | 49 |

Significant incidents: death or injury, \$50,000 or more in damage, 50 barrels of liquid spilled or 5 barrels of volatile liquid
 Serious incidents: death or injury

pipelines safely, that means that, for instance in 2015, 4.3 million gallons of hazardous liquids spilled," Weimer said in an email.

Source: PHMSA

Oil pipelines accounted for about two-thirds of

the leaks and spills in 2015 but 55 percent of the significant incidents. Gas transmission lines — the high-pressure pipes that carry the fuel over long distances — accounted for 20 percent of the overall incidents but 23 percent of the significant incidents.

The Interstate Natural Gas Association of America, which represents the biggest gas lines, said the statistics can be misleading, since PHMSA includes both cross-country and purely intrastate systems together as transmission lines.

Among INGAA's own members, "We've seen a virtual flat line in the number of PHMSA significant incidents," Cathy Landry, a

| All incidents by pipeline type | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|-----|-------|
| Year | Oil/liquids | Gas transmission | Gas gathering | Gas distribution | LNG | Total |
| 2011 | 345 | 118 | 10 | 119 | 0 | 592 |
| 2012 | 366 | 104 | 12 | 90 | 1 | 573 |
| 2013 | 401 | 106 | 6 | 105 | 1 | 619 |
| 2014 | 445 | 132 | 9 | 112 | 3 | 701 |
| 2015 | 456 | 143 | 5 | 103 | 2 | 709 |

Source: PHMSA

spokeswoman for the association, said in an email. "We want drive those numbers down."

The increase in spills and leaks came as U.S. oil and gas production surged, increasing the use of pipelines. Oil output rose about two-thirds from 2011 to 2015, to about 9.4 million barrels a day, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Gas output increased about one-fifth during the same time, to about 74 billion cubic feet a day.

PHMSA increased its enforcement activity in 2015, opening 197 cases. That's a turnaround from 2014, when the agency opened fewer cases and imposed fewer fines than the previous four years ([EnergyWire](#), April 8, 2015).

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