

Aftershocks

McAfee & Taft RegLINC - May 2011

By Chris Paul

The PG&E pipeline explosion of September 9, 2010, has continued to result in scrutiny of and introspection by the pipeline industry. Other incidents prior and subsequent to San Bruno have contributed to the once again renewed focus on pipeline safety that started a decade ago with the Bellingham spill and the Carlsbad explosion, but the impact of San Bruno is, in large part, that activities associated with integrity programs have been accelerated, and public misperceptions may have forced agencies to take positions with respect to enforcement that might be more than necessary given improvements in operations to date and the overall safety record of the pipeline industry. That said, it appears that PHMSA is yet again showing that its personnel understand the industry that they regulate and will provide oversight that has a rational basis and makes sense.



Since San Bruno, we have seen advisory bulletins requiring better communication and coordination with first responders, and requiring pipelines to validate and document integrity (in particular pressure) information. Both initiatives are challenging as they add another layer of issues, and the integrity validation issue will be inherently difficult in cases where systems are older and/or have changed ownership and the records now being sought were not previously retained because there was no obligation (and in most cases no need) to do so. Ultimately, we expect that definitions of what is required to address both of the above will be both workable for the companies and continue to provide high levels of safety for the public in conjunction with reliable and efficient service.

LINKS

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