State ‘disconcerted’ by Enbridge’s disclosures about broken rod left in Straits of Mackinac

By Keith Matheny
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A rod-like boring pipe Enbridge left in the Straits of Mackinac bottom after it broke last fall is about five times longer than the Canadian oil transport giant initially told state regulators. And whether or not to pop hazard — and whether it can be recovered — has not yet been determined, an official with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy said.

Enbridge only last week told EGLE officials that the remaining thin pipe in a collapsed bore-hole on the Straits bottom is about 200 feet long — not the 40 or so feet the company told regulators in November.

An EGLE official said it was “disconcerting” that Enbridge took two months to tell the state about the incident, and then mis-characterized the pipe piece left in the bottom.

“We count on these types of industries to self-report — we don’t have staff and equipment to go out and examine with an ROV (remotely-operated vehicle) — we don’t have an ROV,” said Joseph Haas, EGLE’s Water Resources Division district supervisor in Gaylord.

“It’s probably not uncommon that this happens in this type of work — we use that equipment. It’s the fact that they didn’t immediately report it to us that is disconcerting.”

Critics of Enbridge and its twin, 67-year-old, underwater oil and gas pipelines in the Straits say it’s just the latest episode in which the company failed to provide transparency about troubles with its operations to regulators or the public.

Enbridge last September was conducting bore-hole sampling of rock beneath the Straits, part of more than $350 million plan to build a tunnel under the Straits bottom to house a new oil and gas transmission line, when its tremie pipe broke — a 3-inch, watertight pipe used to pump grout underwater to refill the borehole where rock samples were taken.

The company waited two months, until November, to inform EGLE about the break.

“During that time we were continuing to work on finishing a way to retrieve the rod,” said Enbridge spokesman Ryan Duffy in an email to the Free Press.

“Our contractor was assessing the situation and gathering information, including sending down a remotely-operated vehicle to get a picture of the rod and map its coordinates. They also conducted a risk assessment of the rod on the bottom. We never gave up on trying to retrieve the rod and continued to look for ways to do it.”

In a Dec. 3 “Violation Notice/Oder to Restore” from EGLE to Enbridge, Haas stated: “November 10, 2019, Enbridge reported they would be in the Straits on or about December 12, 2019, while completing the permitted Straits of Mackinac gas transmission boring, one bore hole collapsed, which resulted in 40 feet of 3-inch drilling rod breaking off in the borehole beneath the lakes bottom. This also resulted in an additional 45 feet of 3-inch drilling rod to be removed and dropped onto bottom lands at an estimated 245 feet of water depth within the navigation channel.”

Enbridge announced in December that it had used an underwater remotely operated vehicle, to recover the pipe piece on the Straits bottom. The pipe, which Enbridge calls its twin, had moved to rest against the Line 5 pipeline, but “the rod never posed any safety or environmental risk to Line 5, the water, nor ship traffic in the Straits,” Enbridge said in a statement Dec. 30.

Haas said he learned last week from Eggle that the piece remaining lodged in the Straits bottom is actually about 200 feet in length.

When asked how the length of the remaining segment changed from 40 feet to 200 feet, Duffy said, “I can’t speak to where any other numbers came from.”

Countered Haas, “They said they weren’t sure where the 40-foot number had come from that the state had reported. I replied, ‘Because that’s what you told me.’

It’s not the first time Enbridge has provided delayed, incomplete and later amended information to state regulators about potential problems with its operations in the Straits.

The company knew a section of the required protective coating on its underwater oil pipelines in the Straits of Mackinac was damaged in 2014 — but did not make state officials aware of it for three years, until August 2017.

Duffy late that month described “two or three” areas of expanding bare metal on the underwater pipes, describing one as “Band-Aid sized.” But inspection reports Enbridge shared with the state that September, in response to requests for more information about
the lost coating, showed eight areas on the twin lines where bare metal was exposed to the elements. All but one measured 7 inches or more in diameter. By that November, it was learned there were “dozens” of coating gaps on Line 5.

The missing enamel coating was discovered during pipeline inspections required in a 2016 consent decree between Enbridge and the federal government, part of a settlement stemming from a massive oil spill from an Enbridge oil transmission line near Marshall, Mich., in July 2010 that fouled more than 35 miles of the Kalamazoo River and prompted a four-year cleanup that cost more than $1 billion. Enbridge was fined $61 million as part of an overall $177-million settlement that required improvements to its pipeline networks.

The remaining segment of rod/pipe from September’s break “remains embedded in the borehole,” and “that section cannot be retrieved,” Duffy said.

EGLE tentatively agrees, but is not ready to declare that yet.

“We’ve asked some technical experts to revisit again the currents in the Straits,” Haas said. “We’re waiting to see what they advise, as far as, is there a concern here? Or more of a concern?

“I don’t expect much would be done (to recover) that remaining 200 feet of grout rod. It’s likely recoverable, but it’s a matter of money, effort, worker safety. We’re still going through that assessment.”

Part 325 of Michigan’s Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act “clearly states you need a permit to place a structure or materials on bottom land,” Haas said, and the left-behind tremie pipe could be considered a violation. The state is also considering requesting Enbridge’s 1953 easement with the state allowing the pipeline to be built on the bottom of the Straits of Mackinac.

David Holtz, a spokesman for Traverse City-based Oil and Water Don’t Mix, a nonprofit coalition opposed to Line 5’s continued operation in the Straits, said the leaving behind of the 200-foot section of pipe in the Straits bottom potentially violates the easement as well.

“That’s just not acceptable, and they should be held accountable,” he said.

Jennifer McKay, policy director of the nonprofit Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey, said the issue is about more than a left-behind tremie pipe piece.

“It goes to transparency and Enbridge being forthcoming with information,” she said.

“The state cannot have proper oversight if they don’t have information provided to them that they can rely upon and act upon.”