Enbridge sampling work leaves debris in Straits for months

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On Sept. 12, while crews were collecting rock and soil samples for Enbridge Energy in the Straits of Mackinac, a bore hole collapsed, leaving mechanical debris at the bottom of the waterway.

The company waited two months — until the sample work was done — to tell anyone.

As a result of the incident, a 40-feet long piece of three-inch drill rod became lodged beneath the lake-bed, and another 45-feet long piece of the equipment fell on top of the lakebed. The company completed the sampling work Nov. 17. According to documents obtained by the News-Review, they reported the drill rod debris to the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy two days later, on Nov. 19.

In a phone interview Wednesday, Enbridge spokesman Ryan Duffy said the two-months span between the date of the incident and the report were spent determining the

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best way forward. And now, after that delay, the company won't be able to retrieve the debris until at least spring 2020.

"We were evaluating ways to go down and get it, and looking at the best way to go forward," he said. "We hoped to do it this season, this year, but it became unsafe with the change in the weather. It would be a dive operation that would be high risk in the cold weather, so we're just going to retrieve it in the spring."

He said the debris does not pose any inherent safety or environmental risk. The rod is in a portion of the straits that is about 240 feet deep.

"The crew had some difficulties retrieving (the rod), so... the crew and Enbridge made the decision to lean the rod on the lake bottom until it can be retrieved in the spring, and it doesn't pose a threat of interfering with traffic or anything like that."

The presence of the debris means that Enbridge is in violation of their boring permit under the Natural Resources Environmental Protection Act. Following their report on Nov. 19, Enbridge filed a plan for the retrieval of the debris on Nov. 26.

EGLE has 30 days to review and approve that plan.

"We have an obligation to the people of the state of Michigan," Joseph Haas, Gaylord District Supervisor for EGLE's Water Division said in a phone interview with the News-Review Wednesday. "This has become marine debris, and we have to hold them to the same standard... (dictating that) your material has to be removed in a prompt manner."

Haas said that Enbridge did not break any rules or regulations by waiting two months to file their initial report.

"We certainly would have preferred to have known right away," he said. "It's somewhat disconcerting that there was a delay."

The geotechnical rock and soil sampling work is a necessary first step before Enbridge can build its proposed tunnel at the bottom of the straits. That tunnel would house the Straits portion of Line 5, a 66-year-old petroleum pipeline which runs from Superior, Wisconsin to Sarnia, Ontario. The line also provides natural gas to the Upper Peninsula. Opponents of the aging piece of infrastructure claim that the line poses an imminent risk of rupture.

The proposed "tunnel" was outlined in an agreement between Enbridge and former Gov. Rick Snyder at the tail end of his term in 2018. That agreement has since been subject to a series of legal challenges from the new Attorney General Dana Nessel. Studies suggest that the tunnel would prevent threats to the pipeline's infrastructure and shield the water from oil in the event of rupture, but opponents maintain that extending the life of the pipeline simply increases the risk the an oil spill will occur.

Jennifer McKay, of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey, has called for a complete shutdown of the pipeline. She said the Sept. 12 incident offers further evidence that the Straits is not a suitable location a the pipeline.

"How can the public be confident that there will not be any additional collapses or problems during drilling of a tunnel if Enbridge can't even bore a hole without it collapsing?" she said in a statement to the News-Review.

"The waters and shoreline areas of Lakes Michigan and Huron, including those surrounding and adjacent to the Mackinac Straits contain abundant natural resources that are of great ecological and economic value. The risk associated with the tunnel and the potential collapsing of the lake bottomland is far too great when we are talking about our Great Lakes and our way of life."

Enbridge began the geotechnical work portion of the tunnel plan in July when they sent a ship called the Highland Eagle to the Straits. Now that the sampling work is done, Enbridge will spend the next several months studying the samples. The findings of those studies will eventually determine the best route for the tunnel, and the specifications needed for the machine that will forge that path.

Duffy said in the mean time, the company is in the final steps of hiring its design team and contractors for the project.

"Things will roll forward from there," he said. "We're still committed to starting construction in 2021 and finishing the project in 2024."