Enbridge awaits permits to correct pipeline support issue

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Erosion at the bottom of the Straits of Mackinac has opened up an 81-foot stretch of Enbridge's Line 5 petroleum pipeline that is unsupported by lakebed or steel supports. That is six feet longer than the minimum amount of unsupported line that is allowable under the 1953 easement, which originally granted Enbridge the right to lay down its pipeline in the Straits.

Technically speaking, Enbridge is not in violation of the law yet, but the company could be if the problem goes unresolved for too long. And part of that is out of Enbridge officials' hands while they wait on the proper permits to correct the issue.

Enbridge announced the issue in a press release late Wednesday afternoon.

Earlier that same afternoon, officials from the company were with Northern Michigan reporters — including a News-Review reporter — on a two-and-a-half hour press tour around the Highland Eagle, a ship which is doing tunnel research work for the company in the Straits of Mackinac. At no point during the presentation did any Enbridge official mention the span issue, despite the fact that they had been tracking the problem for about a month, and preparing to go public with news that day.

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That evening, during an open house in Petoskey, Enbridge spokesman Ryan Duffy explained to the News-Review that the company wanted to inform the state of the issue first, before commenting publicly.

By design, Line 5 is supported by the lakebed of the Straits of Mackinac. However, over time, parts of that lakebed can wash away, leaving unsupported spans. If those spans grow past the 75-foot limit, Enbridge is required to correct the issue, which is accomplished by installing steel "anchor supports" to those exposed areas.

"The Straits of Mackinac is a dynamic and ever-changing system, because of the flows, and so you see scouring of the lakebed, which changes the bottom, essentially," Jennifer McKay, policy director of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, said. "So, at one time what was supported, can wash away."

Duffy noted that sometimes such changing sediment patterns can cause the spans to shrink instead of grow, but that is not the norm.

Enbridge is required to conduct routine inspections of the pipeline to ensure it stays in compliance. Officials maintain that the current span does not constitute a safety issue.

"It's not a safety concern. It's not a span issue," Duffy said. "It's about the permanence of the supports."

Duffy said that if the company noticed the span was growing about a month ago, but was waiting to see if the Army Corps permits would be granted in time. By Wednesday, Enbridge determined that it had to report the matter to the state.

Lynn Rose, a spokesperson for the Army Corps of Engineers, says the permit is a "high priority" item for the agency, and officials there are working on a decision soon.

She noted the agency did have a final set of questions for Enbridge to answer before making a decision, but those requirements were fulfilled July 23.

Duffy suggested that the currently proposed plan to place the Straits pipeline segment in a tunnel would help solve such problems going forward.

"The tunnel project ... is a good solution going forward, because we wouldn't have to worry about supports, we would have to worry about span issues if it was in a tunnel," he said.