

# Los Angeles Times

## Defendants settle for \$1.6 million as details emerge on 44,000-gallon Ventura oil spill



A contractor guides a hose into Prince Barranca gorge in Ventura to pump out oil that spilled June 23, 2016, from a pipeline valve. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

By [JAKE SHERIDAN](#)

JULY 22, 2020

9:11 PM

Four years after 44,814 gallons of unrefined crude gushed out of a Crimson oil pipeline, the Ventura County district attorney's office said the companies responsible for the 2016 accident will pay up.

A media release from the office this week said Colorado-based Crimson Pipeline LLC, which owns the 10-inch pipeline that starts in Ventura and runs 87 miles to Wilmington, has agreed to a settlement requiring it to pay \$1.3 million in civil penalties, costs and natural resources damage. The contractor who worked on the pipeline before the spill, CD Lyon, will pay an additional \$300,000.

“Obviously the pandemic has affected negotiations ... everyone’s hurting right now,” said Karen Wold, a Ventura County senior deputy district attorney who worked on the case. But, she added, “The environment is too important to let people have these types of spills, whether it’s negligent or intentional. ... We need to make sure our natural resources are still there for our children, and our children’s children.”

The company didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

For six months after the incident, two district attorney’s office investigators and a lawyer looked into the spill full-time, Wold said. A civil complaint filed Tuesday by the district attorney and the California attorney general’s office, which represented the state’s Department of Fish and Wildlife in proceedings, paints a fresh, full picture of the incident, connecting it to a failed valve replacement rushed because of cost-cutting measures.

According to the document, the companies “were anxious to complete the valve replacement in one day because Crimson would be required to make a special payment to its electric utility if it pumped during peak hours between noon and 6 p.m.” If the oil wasn’t up and running quickly, Crimson would have had to pay \$15,000.

Things started going wrong at the Hall Canyon repair site when the team contracted to make the fix brought the wrong tools for the job, the report said. To save time, they didn’t reconnect the remote leak detection system. Night fell and work continued. After 17 hours of labor, the repair team left, thinking they had sealed the connection between the pipe and the valve. But three nuts “were completely loose,” a third-party investigator found.

According to the report, a visible gap remained at the valve connection, which wasn’t properly inspected after installation. Neither CD Lyon nor Crimson had personnel onsite as oil began to flow through the pipes.

About 700 barrels of oil seeped out with the detection system offline, the report says. It flowed down a steep canyon slope and about half a mile through Prince Barranca, a gorge that typically fills with water during storms. The arroyo it entered led to the ocean, but the leak was stopped before it got to the water after a Ventura County resident reported oil in his backyard to authorities at 5:30 a.m.

Shortly after the civil complaint was released, defendants settled with the state and local prosecutors.

“For our county, this was an extraordinarily large spill,” Wold said. In 2016, *The Times* reported Crimson had been responsible for 11 spills since 2006, including a 280,000-gallon Ventura leak in 2008.

Crimson has more legal proceedings ahead. A lawsuit filed by homeowners affected by the spill in 2018 has yet to play out.

“It’s the simple thing you learn as a child: You make a mess, you clean it up,” said Oxnard-based attorney Mark Hiepler, who is representing four affected homeowners.

Hiepler’s clients are seeking \$16 million to cover nuisance damages and the complete removal of left-over oil. Crimson estimates 6,000 gallons remain, but that could be as high as 20,000 gallons, Hiepler said.

He said cleanup crews made up of trucks and hundreds of workers filled the homeowners’ backyards for months after the spill. Two homeowners had to move, and some developed breathing problems, Hiepler said. The plaintiffs tried mediation before suing two years after the incident, he added.

There’s still “a mess, and it’s in homeowners’ backyards,” Hiepler said.