

# Oil Pipeline and Environmental Disasters in the US, Canada and Brazil. Triggered by Oil and Mining Conglomerates

Enbridge Energy's 2010 Kalamazoo River Oil Spill: Worst Pipeline Disaster in the History of America

By [Dr. Gary G. Kohls](#)

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Region: [Canada](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [USA](#)

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*"This investigation identified a complete breakdown of safety at Enbridge. Their employees performed like Keystone Kops and failed to recognize that their pipeline had ruptured and continued to pump crude into the environment. Despite multiple alarms and a loss of pressure in the pipeline, for more than 17 hours and through three shifts, they failed to follow their own shutdown procedures. Enbridge restarted the pipeline twice in that 17-hour period, pumping oil that would account for 81 percent of the total spill." — [National Transportation Safety Board](#) Chairman Deborah Hersman*

## Enbridge's Kalamazoo disaster

On July 25, 2010 Enbridge Energy's Alberta tar sands pipeline burst near Marshall, Michigan, spilling an estimated 1.1 million gallons of toxic heavy crude oil (including various petroleum-based diluents) into the Kalamazoo River. (Note that, in order to easily flow through an oil pipeline, the extra-heavy sludgy oil peculiar to the Canadian tar sands needs to be diluted with a 25% - 50% mixture of dangerous petroleum solvents, including the known carcinogen, benzene).

As soon as Enbridge workers in Hazmat suits arrived on the scene the first day of the catastrophe, they tested for benzene fumes and other toxic volatile organic substances and ordered nearby residents to evacuate immediately. Some of the affected residents never came back to their homes for 60 days.

Enbridge's Kalamazoo disaster was North America's worst and most expensive inland oil spill disaster. To my knowledge, it was never reported in the Duluth News-Tribune or on the local nightly news. Nobody that I know ever saw or heard a single report about it on local or regional television or radio news. Sadly, the same could be said about most of the other environmental disasters mentioned below that involved corporations that have a presence in the upper Midwest.

The Enbridge pipeline that ruptured in Michigan delivered dirty tar sands oil from Ontario. That pipeline crossed northern Minnesota, (and both the Mississippi and St Louis Rivers); crossed the entire state of Wisconsin; and ended up at a terminal in Indiana.

Tragically for the Kalamazoo River and every fish and minnow and crawfish in it, a six-foot

break in the pipeline sent hours of high pressure toxic petroleum products into the Tallmadge Creek, a tributary of the Lake Michigan-bound Kalamazoo River. The broken pipe polluted a 35 mile segment of the river, and the damage will likely be permanent.



The Enbridge pipeline rupture that contaminated the Kalamazoo River on July 25, 2010

#### Oil and Heavy Metal Pollution of Water and Soil is Forever

It is important to emphasize that the pollution of any water or soil resource from significant amounts of chemicals, especially oil and toxic metals, whether the resource is an aquifer, a river, a bog, a wild rice bed or a lake, CAN NEVER BE FULLY REMEDIATED, despite what is said in the propaganda campaigns that are cunningly generated from the guilty mining, energy or petroleum companies whose flawed technology is responsible.

Petroleum products and heavy metals are both capable of floating on, mixing with or sinking beneath the water (thus flowing far beyond the mouth of the stream, attaching to the shoreline and/or sinking into the sludge at the bottom.

“Clean-up” of an oil spill is thus a myth. “Clean-ups” can never completely suck out or dredge up or de-contaminate all the pollutants no matter what method is tried.

To make things worse, the co-opted mainstream media can be counted on to simply (and very lazily) repeat the propaganda that comes from Big Oil, Big Mining, Big Coal or Big Energy when their spokespersons hold the reassuring press conferences that follow every “accidental” spill. Corporations have their duty to their advertisers, investors and stock market analysts to not unduly stir up a lack of confidence in the stock price.

#### Mining “Accidents” are Inevitable and They Could Happen Here

The inevitable “accidents-just-waiting-to-happen” scenario applies to some well-known examples like the Exxon Valdez disaster, the British Petroleum/Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, Enbridge’s Kalamazoo River disaster, and some of the mining industry tailings ponds “breaches” that occur so frequently or just slowly leak toxins forever.

Such “accidents” usually contaminate nearby lakes, river bottoms and aquifers, (rapidly or slowly) poisoning people, animals, fish and other wildlife into perpetuity. The corporation that says otherwise is lying.

Environmental damage from corporations (not “man”) can be anticipated wherever huge mining or energy corporations are extracting, processing or transporting the natural resources that usually have been stolen (as Woody Guthrie wrote, “by the six-gun or by the pen”) from the indigenous people that had occupied their sacred land for centuries before the corporations began to privatize everything and exploit the natural resources that were found on or under somebody else’s land.

### The Worst Environmental Disaster in the History of Canada: the Mount Polley Tailings Pond Breach

I have previously written about a couple of the major tailings pond breach disasters around the world, including Canada’s worst environmental disaster in history. That catastrophe occurred on August 5, 2014 at the Mount Polley copper-nickel mine in British Columbia.

On that tragic day the previously very productive salmon and trout fishery – the once-pristine Quesnel Lake and portions of the 800 mile-long Fraser River – was polluted with massive amounts of sludge and sludge water that contained large amounts of the toxic metals lead, arsenic, nickel, zinc, cadmium, vanadium, antimony, manganese and mercury.

Below is a photo of the mouth of Hazeltine Creek as it enters into Quesnel Lake after it was transformed into a poisoned wasteland by the tailings pond breach upstream. One can only imagine how Minnesota’s Embarrass River or the St Louis River (or Lake Superior for that matter) might be similarly transformed at some time in the future if the PolyMet project goes forward and there is an accident of nature such as a simple deluge of rain that could easily dissolve the earthen walls of the tailings pond.



Above is the mouth of the tiny (normally about 5-6 feet wide) Hazeltine Creek (now 120-150 feet wide) as it enters into Quesnel Lake, the deepest, purest lake in British Columbia and a famous trout

and salmon fishery, that is, until August 4, 2014, when 24,000,000 cubic meters of toxic water and mine slurry breached the Mt Polley tailings dam and exploded downstream. The tan material in the photo represents floating dead trees that were swept away in the massive sludge flood. The only useful thing that Imperial Metals (Vancouver) could do in the aftermath was to break up the floating logs so that they wouldn't destroy downstream bridges as the toxic water flowed into the Quesnel River. For more before and after photos, click [here](#).

The Worst Environmental disaster in the History of Brazil

The worst environmental disaster in the history of Brazil occurred on November 5, 2015 at the Samarco iron mine. Samarco's tailings pond broke, and the massive amount of sludge and toxic water proceeded to contaminate - forever - the 300 mile-long Rio Doce river that emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. That river will never be the same and many of the indigenous people are now refugees from their land.



A totally destroyed Rio Doce river village that was downstream from the Brazilian Samarco mining disaster - Nov. 5, 2015





The once pristine Rio Doce river after the Brazilian Samarco iron mine tailings breach The mining company responsible was [BHP Billiton](#), the world's largest mining company. It is an Australian-British mining, metals and [petroleum](#) company headquartered in [Perth](#), Australia. It lost 7.8 billion dollars over the last two quarters.

The water, soil and air in the area where industrial spills occur can be expected to remain polluted forever, just as the toxic metals found in coal ash tailings ponds and coal-fired plants can destroy communities as their toxic sludge and smoke poison the downstream and downwind environment.

There are few places on earth that are not downwind or downstream from some toxic industry. Rural, non-agricultural, northern Minnesota is comparatively safe, but it may not be for long. It depends on whether or not polluting corporations are allowed to go ahead with risky mining projects without accepting fully independent regulatory and scientific oversight.

#### Coal-powered Electrical Energy Plants Don't Just Pollute the Air

It needs to be emphasized that both coal smoke and the unburnable by-product (coal ash) that remains behind contain dangerous substances that include the carcinogenic and neurotoxic heavy metals arsenic, cadmium, uranium, lead, and mercury.

In his essay, "A Tale of Two Spills", Jeff Danner [writes](#):

"Every year in the United States we produce approximately 140 million tons of coal ash. Most of this ash accumulates on site and waits for the Gods of Entropy to conjure up a storm, an earthquake, a human error, or a rusty pipe to allow it to break out of its storage location. Since coal plants are nearly always located along waterways, this situation almost guarantees that more and more of our water ways will be contaminated in the coming years."

Isn't it interesting that neither Enbridge's Kalamazoo River disaster nor Imperial Metals' Mount Polley disaster nor BHP Billiton's Samarco mine disaster nor the many coal mining tailings ponds disasters were effectively reported in the Duluth News-Tribune or other northern Minnesota media outlets that are invested in the mining industry?

Enbridge's Sandpiper Pipeline, PolyMet and Twin Metals are Potential Environmental Catastrophes Waiting to Happen in Our Backyard

Potential environmental catastrophes like the ones mentioned in this article are waiting to

happen at some point in the future, particularly in the cases of the projected copper-nickel mines in northern Minnesota that are owned and operated by foreign mega-corporations, including Switzerland's Glencore (the largest commodities trading company in the world) that owns PolyMet and Chile's Antofagasta corporation (owned by the wealthiest family in Chile) that owns Twin Metals.

It is increasingly apparent that one cannot trust the proclamations that emanate from most of our Two-Party system career politicians or even the governmental regulatory agencies. Far too many of members of those entities have serious conflicts of interest due to the money, influence or other favors they have received from large corporations.

Say Thanks to the Duluth 7, Environmental Activists in General and the Downstream Business Coalition

Duluth should be proud of its courageous environmental activist heroes like the members of the Duluth 7 group that has been blowing the whistle on each of the three projects that are intent on making huge profits by extracting our state's natural resources while simultaneously risking the health of our water resources.

We need to honor the members of the Duluth 7 and all the environmental activists who were present but who chose to not get arrested on November 2, 2015, when they entered the Duluth office of Enbridge and challenged the legitimacy of their efforts to force Native Indian tribes and private landowners to grant it permission to despoil their land by building dangerous, easily sabotageable and potentially polluting pipelines on their property.

Courageous environmentally-conscious people like the Duluth 7 see clearly the immorality of extractive corporations - especially the threats they pose to northern Minnesota's once-pristine fishable, drinkable and wild rice-compatible water.

The members of the group embody the ideals of such altruistic groups as the Native Lives Matter Coalition, MN350.org, Honor the Earth, MPIRG, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, EcoWatch, Isaak Walton League, National Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Club, Greenpeace USA National Wildlife Federation, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, etc, etc. These groups deserve support.

We must also applaud the principled stance of the Duluth-area businesses that comprise the Downstream Business Coalition. It probably took a fair amount of courage for those 80 small businesses to do what they know is right. They have risked having their goods and services boycotted by pro-mining factions. I hope that my readers reward them by doing more business with them.

#### An After-thought

While I was doing the research for this article, I came to the realization that many of us in Northern Minnesota had been deprived of being exposed to the many teachable moments concerning the mining industry's threats. I realized that we have been victimized by the very subtle press censorship and a lack of good investigative journalism into these subjects. It isn't a total black-listing; perhaps it deserves to be called a grey-listing. But I get a little angry whenever I see otherwise good people fall for the industry's propaganda about "jobs, jobs, jobs" while ignoring the many downsides. Powerful corporate entities in our society are benefiting from the secrecy of their boardrooms, from the support of professional politicians

and from the exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants. It's past time to wise up and speak out.

*Dr Kohls is a retired physician who practiced holistic, non-drug, mental health care for the last decade of his family practice career. He now writes a weekly column for the Reader Weekly, an alternative newsweekly published in Duluth, Minnesota, USA. Many of Dr Kohls' columns are archived at [http://duluthreader.com/articles/categories/200\\_Duty\\_to\\_Warn](http://duluthreader.com/articles/categories/200_Duty_to_Warn)*

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