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Leaking pipeline blamed for death of 300 trees in Brock

BY ELIZABETH CAMPBELL
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BROCK — Two weeks ago, Ralph Walker noticed that oak trees growing near his family-owned nursery were dying, but other nearby plants were still green.

"I thought it was odd," said Walker, who helps run Cole's Plants, which has operated in the area for more than 50 years. "There were green trees and then trees with no leaves. I thought worms had started in on them."

Then he drove into standing salt water at about the same time he saw dead fish near a dry stock tank.

Walker immediately suspected that a nearby pipeline, owned by a subsidiary of XTO Energy that connects its gas wells to saltwater injection wells, had sprung a leak.

Walker and his relatives blame the leaking pipeline for killing about 300 trees and endangering at least 200 more. They also worry that the entire water table could be contaminated, though XTO has told them that tests on some water wells are negative.

On Friday, the Coles filed a lawsuit in Parker County against XTO and Barnett Gathering, the owner of the pipeline, alleging that a saltwater spill from a steel pipe had damaged their property, killing vegetation and contaminating soil and a stock tank.

Texas Railroad Commission reports from Oct. 31 and Nov. 5 indicate that there were several leaks in a 6-inch steel pipe and that the pollution is in an area 800 by 400 feet. The area has been partially excavated, and the operator is still searching for the "perimeters and depth" of the pollution, according to the report.

An attorney representing the Cole family, Jim Eggleston, questioned why the pipeline corroded after being underground for about three years.

"If there were five holes within 200 feet, what else has leaked out? That water is highly corrosive," Eggleston said.

Robert Wood, an attorney for XTO Energy, said he could not comment on the spill or how the company was handling cleanup efforts.

"I'm not authorized to comment on behalf of the company," he said.

Gary Simpson, a spokesman for XTO, did not return calls seeking comment.

Dirt removal

Eggleston estimated that since Oct. 30, the Cole family has lost 300-500 trees that grew on approximately 10 acres. There are 200 trees marked with orange ribbons, meaning they will be removed, he said.

Since the leak was discovered, bulldozers and semi trucks are a common sight, with XTO removing piles of dirt the size of houses to determine how far the contamination spread, Eggleston said.

According to the lawsuit, approximately 3,000 cubic yards of soil have been removed.

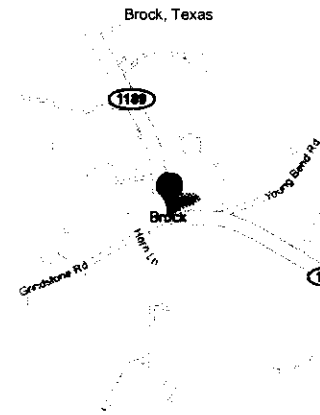
Now, the Coles and their neighbors worry that the water table, which is around 100 feet underground, could be

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A heavy equipment operator moves dirt near a stand of dead oak trees in unincorporated Parker County on Thursday. Many trees on the property died off when a pipe leading to a saltwater injection well began leaking. (Star-Telegram/Darrell Byers)

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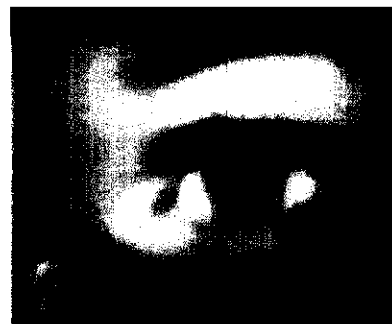
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contaminated, despite assurances from XTO that the water wells have not been affected.

Eggleston said if the water table is contaminated, the nursery business will be lost.

Rows of greenhouses filled with pansies and other bedding plants are about 150 feet from the area where soil is being removed. Sprinklers irrigate the plants with well water.

Eggleston said there is no guarantee that the water table isn't contaminated.

"Fresh water is their livelihood," he said.

Soil testing

The Coles hired an environmental consultant, Chris Talamini of Alpha Testing, to take samples of the soil and drill down to the water table to test the water.

Talamini said when saltwater contaminates the soil, the sodium and chloride quickly kill vegetation, and in the case of wastewater from gas drilling, there are other petroleum byproducts such as benzene, heavy metals and some radioactive compounds that affect human health.

The process to reclaim or treat the contaminated soil is complex, he said.

If there are petroleum contaminants in the soil, there are treatments using microbes to eat the chemicals and then replenish the soil.

But saltwater contamination is a different matter. The soil may be ruined if the levels of sodium and chloride are too high, Talamini said. The dirt must be hauled to a regulated landfill.

Clean is clean

Ramona Nye, a spokeswoman for the Texas Railroad Commission, which is responsible for overseeing the gas drilling industry, said if contaminants spill onto the ground, the operator is required to clean them up.

If ground or surface water is contaminated, the incidents are handled on a case-by-case basis, she said.

As for pipelines, the "nonjurisdictional" transport lines located in rural areas don't have to meet federal safety requirements, Nye said.

At the same time Walker discovered the saltwater spill, the Railroad Commission ordered that a well near Aledo that is operated by another company be shut down after residents discovered damp spots on the ground.

Eggleston said there is a memorandum of understanding between the Railroad Commission and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to allow the Railroad Commission to handle environmental situations from gas drilling.

Meanwhile, Eggleston said people need to be aware of the consequences of the Barnett Shale gas fields.

"I'm not a green environmentalist, but you look at the damage and say, 'That isn't right.' Clean water is clean water. Dead vegetation is dead vegetation."

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