



Oil is seen along Talmadge Creek in Marshall Township, Mich., near the Kalamazoo River. Photo credit: Paul Sancya/ AP/ Shutterstock

**Q&A with Durk Dunham,
Director of Emergency Management
Calhoun County, Michigan**



Durk Dunham stands in front of the remediated Kalamazoo River. As director of emergency management in Calhoun County, Mich., Dunham was strategically involved in emergency response during the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history. Photo courtesy of Durk Dunham.

In July of 2010, an Enbridge pipeline leaked over one million gallons of heavy crude oil into a Michigan watershed, including a 37-mile stretch of the Kalamazoo River. Nearly a decade later, the event remains the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history.

Durk Dunham, director of Emergency Management in Calhoun County, Mich., recently spoke with us to answer questions about leak response, remediation, and what he learned about pipelines and emergency response preparedness.

How did you learn of the pipeline incident?

I was having lunch with the sheriff and the undersheriff, and my cell phone rang. It was the deputy dispatch director, and she said, "You're going to need to come to Marshall. We have some kind of oil spill, and I think you're going to want to see it."

What happened during the first 24 hours?

The coordination began for me around noon. The night of the spill, Enbridge had a helicopter here. From the helicopter flight, to people flying in and creating our meeting process, to structuring the Incident Command System (ICS)—it was so vast, and there were so many working parts. Everybody retained the same goal, in my view, and that was, "We've got to fix this. We've got to get it right."

What was it like coordinating this response with other agencies and the pipeline operator?

The ICS structure was enormous. The players were the EPA, Enbridge, Calhoun County Emergency Management, the Michigan State Police, Calhoun County Health Department and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

There were a lot of deep discussions—some angry, some frustrating—but at no time was any of it in a bad way. The

discussions were based on the idea that we were all heading in the same direction.

What would happen if a similar spill took place today?

We've spent so much microscopic time on what can be done in the first few hours of a spill. Before, we kind of trickled into response. Now, if I got the call, my first response would be, "What's the status with the pipeline company?" And they would have already been contacted. I'd be immediately headed to the site. We have fire departments that will deploy boom if it is safe to do so, but the primary responsibility for cleanup is going to be the pipeline company.

What do you recommend to other emergency managers planning for emergency response?

What happened to us is an extremely rare scenario. Most emergency managers will go through their whole career and not have a single major disaster of any kind. Tornadoes, hurricanes and flooding are the three big ones. Even though we had the spill, it's not our number one risk. As the emergency manager, you need to know the number risk in your county. Know what it is and how to handle it.

What should an emergency manager know about pipelines?

Emergency managers need to know if they have pipelines running through their county and who owns the pipeline. The next thing would be, "Who is my emergency go-to?" Make sure dispatch has that contact information.

What is the Kalamazoo River like today?

The restoration of the river and surrounding areas is unbelievable. People are actively using the river for entertainment like fishing and kayaking. I think the river is in better shape than it's been in decades in my county. It's a forever testament that says to me, "Mission Accomplished."



A worker watches water come out of a pipe in Talmadge Creek where booms have been set up to contain an oil spill in Marshall Township, Mich., near the Kalamazoo River. Photo credit: Paul Sancya/ AP/ Shutterstock



Dredging equipment is utilized to contain and remediate an oil spill near the Kalamazoo River. Photo credit: Justin Ritter.

Emergency Response Resources

The Pipeline Association for Public Awareness provides online resources for emergency response and emergency management agencies including online training modules that discuss impact zones, Potential Impact Radius (PIR) and evacuation guidance.

Access online training and other resources at pipelineawareness.org/training

