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Fuel spill requires evacuation in Kenly

Clean-up continues as EPA investigates

By Elanor Wainscott
News Staff Writer

State and federal agencies are investigating the spill of approximately 1,000-to-4,000 gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel from a 10,000-gallon holding tank from Etheridge Oil Company on Saturday night at the canal between Gardner Avenue and Highway 301 in Kenly.

Environmental Protection Agency spokesperson Dawn Paris Young said the tank was not full and that 2,600 gallons have been recovered as of Monday.

"I do expect those numbers to increase, but I do not know by how much," she said. "Crews are actively doing recovery and removing saturated vegetation."

Young said the cause of the leak was a frozen valve at the bottom of the tank. Officials have not yet determined whether a fine will be assessed for the leak.

Susan Massengale, of the NC Division of Water Quality, department of environment and natural

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Kenly Fire Chief Paul Whitehurst talks with a hazardous materials clean-up crew member, who is pointing toward where a fuel spill originated Saturday night. Crews spent all of Saturday night containing the spill

in the canal next to where the leak started. Clean-up crews will work this week until all the fuel is taken out of the canal. Residents living along the canal were evacuated in case there was a fire or explosion.

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resources, said quick, physical tests were done downstream from the spill that would indicate problems and show if further testing would be necessary. The tests done included a test for dissolved oxygen (aquatic animals get oxygen from dissolved oxygen), as the foam used to cover the affected area can use up the oxygen, a temperature test and a conductivity (salts) test.

"According to these tests, the spill was contained," she said. "The parameters indicated that things were normal."

Highland Environmental from Raleigh and Eastern Environmental from Rocky Mount, both brought in by Etheridge Oil Company a company contracted by Oil Company, are working on the clean up, according to Massengale.

Ken Rhame, on-scene coordinator, Federal EPA, said soil was contaminated and removal would start by the end of the week after underground utilities have been located. A sample soil test will be taken to determine if removal was successful.

Rhame talked with Etheridge Oil Company on Monday about clean up and the company was being cooperative.

"The company is committed to doing the right thing," he said. "The incident is still under investigation, but I'm sure those factors will be taken into consideration when determining if a fine will be paid."

The response from the Kenly Fire Department and other agencies was textbook, according Rhame.

"A lot of credit is due to the responders," he said. "They made all the right calls, notified the right people and got the residents out of the area."

Etheridge Oil Company officials on Monday declined to comment.

About 50 Kenly residents who live along a canal that runs through portions of town, who

were evacuated Saturday night because of an explosive fuel leak, were back in their homes Sunday morning, according to Kenly Fire Chief Paul Whitehurst.

The residents, who live along Sixth and Seventh streets and along Highway 301, were asked to leave their homes between 9:30 and 10 p.m. Saturday night when the fire department investigated a strong odor of gasoline.

Whitehurst said that when the department arrived at the canal between Gardner Avenue and Highway 301 that runs along Etheridge Oil Company property, firefighters found that a 10,000-gallon holding tank had been leaking and that the contents of the tank had run into the canal.

The fire chief said he did not know how long the tank had been leaking but that he estimates that about 1,000 gallons leaked into the canal and was carried west toward Sixth and Seventh Streets. By the time firefighters arrived, said Whitehurst, the tank had nearly stopped leaking because its contents had drained out.

He said the contents of the tank was a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel and was used to hold contaminated fuels.

Residents along the canal were asked to leave and carried to the Kenly Fire Department until a shelter was opened at North Johnston Middle School.

Whitehurst said many of the residents drove themselves to the shelter, although some were transported by emergency vehicles. By about 2:30 a.m. the shelter was closed, said Whitehurst, because those who sought a place to evacuate had departed to stay with friends and relatives.

By 8 a.m. Sunday most of the residents had returned to their homes and a slight odor of fuel could still be smelled. Whitehurst said there no longer was any danger of fire or explosion.

Whitehurst said there was a fear Saturday night by emergency officials upon arriving that an explosion or fire could occur and that's why residents along the canal were asked to leave.

Kenly called for help from Selma Fire Department, which

brought its foam truck and covered the affected area of the canal with foam. Whitehurst said this greatly reduced the danger of fire or explosion because the foam sealed the explosive fumes.

Whitehurst said about 350 gallons of the \$13-per-gallon foam was used on the emergency.

He said emergency crews immediately began using fuel-soaking materials to get the fuel out of the canal and to stop it from heading any farther west. He said most of the fuel was contained in the Sixth and Seventh street areas, where the initial call of strong fuel odors came.

Numerous area emergency departments assisted including Crossroads Fire Department in Lucama, Wilson and Johnston county emergency medical service squads, sheriff's departments from both counties along with fire departments from Micro, Wilson's Mills, Princeton and Bethany. Kenly Police, the state Highway Patrol and the state Department of Transportation were also involved in the emergency. The American Red Cross also assisted with getting the shelter open.

Highway 301 through Kenly was closed from about 9:30 p.m. Saturday until about 8 a.m. Sunday morning, said Whitehurst. Traffic was detoured to Highway 581 just north of Kenly, to St. Mary's Church Road, Highway 222 and then back to Highway 301.