

## Floodwaters cause oil spill near Spring Creek

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By Catherine Dominguez



Soil testing following the cleanup of an oil spill is continuing after floodwaters toppled several large barrels of oil near Spring Creek in south Montgomery County. Sulpher Springs-based Hopco Operating Company operates a drilling site just south Pruitt Road near the creek. According to information from the Texas Railroad Commission, the site was flooded during the storms that moved through the area Memorial Day weekend. More than 10 feet of water flooded the area causing between 70 and 77 barrels of oil to spill on the two acre site located in the 45-acre Montgomery County Preserve.

“They have the right to do things on that drill site even if we own the land,” said Assistant County Attorney BD Griffin. “The mineral (rights owner) has some primary rights.” Griffin said the lease for the minerals rights dates back to 1948. The county acquired the land in 2012 as part of the Spring Creek Nature Preserve project and only owns the surface rights.

Ramona Nye, spokesperson for the TRC, said Hopco was issued a notice of violation regarding the spill. The company reported the spill to the Commissioner May 31. The spill occurred May 27. “The Railroad Commission will continue to monitor the operator’s cleanup activities until the lease is brought into compliance with Commission rules,” Nye said in a statement to The Courier. “The Railroad Commission responds to all reports of potential oil releases with urgency to ensure protection of public safety and the environment. Operators are required by Commission rules to report spills to the Commission and contain and remediate releases.

“Additionally, the Commission dispatches inspectors to reported spills as quickly as it is safe for them to access a potentially affected area. The Railroad Commission oversees containment and cleanup to ensure it is done in compliance with RRC rules.”

Officials with Hopco could not be reached before press time.

Scott Nichols, director of Environmental Health for Montgomery County, said he has been on site during the cleanup. “At this time, I do not believe there is major concern,” he said noting

samples are being collected for testing to determine the environment impact. Part of the process of cleaning the spill included excavating the area and removing the soil, Nichols said.

However, Precinct 3 Commissioner James Noack said the county was not notified of the spill. It was actually discovered while he and his staff were surveying the areas along the creek after the floodwater has receded.

“My concern is the fact that Montgomery County, the property owner, was not notified,” he said. “My job is to protect the integrity of our assets. A pristine greenway is not only an asset to the county but the entire region.

“In the future, we want to be notified as soon as possible so we can make sure that our assets are protected.”