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A West Texas pipeline explosion was reported minutes after an earthquake. Here's what to know

By **Amanda Drane**, Staff writer

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A tractor-trailer hauling liquid from oil and gas operations in the Permian Basin.
The Oilfield Photographer Inc. / The Oilfield Photographer, Inc.

One of the state's strongest earthquakes to date rattled West Texas late Friday evening. Four minutes later, dispatchers in Reeves County received a call about a pipeline explosion not far from the quake's epicenter, according to the county's emergency manager.

The pipeline incident's proximity to the earthquake raises questions about whether trembling earth could have triggered the blast, which caused a fire but no injuries and was quickly extinguished.

Proving such causation is always tricky, but in this case the simple facts of the incident are disputed.

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The company that owns the pipeline, Houston-based Coterra, said a release from one of its natural gas lines caused the fire Friday evening in Reeves County, but that it occurred at 10 p.m. — well before the earthquake at 11:53 p.m. The company said it was investigating the cause.

Reeves County Emergency Manager Jerry Bullard said the pipeline explosion came through dispatch at 11:57 p.m. He was hesitant to link the earthquake with the explosion southeast of Orla, but it wasn't the first time an infrastructural failure or blowout has been reported shortly after a quake.

It made him think, "maybe this was a contributing factor."

He wasn't the only one mentioning the two events in the same sentence. Texas Sen. César Blanco said in [a post on X](#) Saturday morning that his office was monitoring a pipeline explosion that followed an earthquake in West Texas.

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The Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the state's oil and gas industry and is responsible for responding to industrial incidents, didn't answer questions about the explosion.

The earthquake struck an area where the commission has been limiting the injection of oilfield wastewater underground — a practice it says is contributing to a rash of earthquakes in Culberson and Reeves counties.

The Friday earthquake was among the strongest to rattle Texas in recent years, according to data collected by TexNet, a University of Texas research program that began tracking the state's earthquakes in 2017. TexNet's data shows it was one of six to reach magnitude 5.0 or greater.

Another sizable earthquake shook the same area of West Texas on Tuesday. The second quake reached magnitude 4.7.

A spokesperson for the Railroad Commission, Bryce Dubee, said the commission

is investigating the two earthquakes. “We have sent inspectors to the area to assess the situation as part of our efforts to reduce seismicity possibly caused by underground injection of produced water into disposal wells.”

What do the researchers say?

Shaking observed in the area of the pipeline explosion after the earthquake was relatively low, said Ellen Rathje, an expert in earthquakes’ impacts on manmade structures who is UT Austin’s Janet S. Cockrell Centennial Chair in Engineering.

That said, how likely it is for even low level shakes to cause damage depends largely on the integrity of the structure.

“If you have infrastructure that is very close to failure,” she said, “it might not take very strong shaking to cause some damage.”

It can be difficult to prove whether an earthquake has damaged an underground pipeline or well, and there is no clear reporting mechanism, said Laura Capper, principal of the consulting firm EnergyMakers Advisory Group.

“To my knowledge there is no requirement that damage be reported,” Capper said.

Earthquakes are likely to keep coming, even if efforts to curb wastewater injection stay on track, said Katie Smye, principal investigator at the Bureau of Economic Geology’s Center for Injection and Seismicity Research at UT Austin.

Smye said it could take years for disturbed underground systems to settle, and for earthquakes to stop.

“It can take a long time for these systems to equilibrate,” she said.

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Amanda is responsible for holding major energy companies, power providers and their leadership to account. She works to help audiences make sense of these companies’ roles and responsibilities in major news events, while diving into some of the consequences of their choices and decisions in our region.

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