



SOTE Oil Pipeline

[español]

SOTE Oil Pipeline, also known as **Sistema de Oleoducto Transecuatoriano** or **Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline System**, is an oil pipeline in Ecuador.

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This article is part of the **Global Fossil Infrastructure Tracker**, a project of **Global Energy Monitor** (<http://globalenergymonitor.org>).

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Location

The Transecuatorian Pipeline System (SOTE) runs from Petroecuador's Lago Agrio station just east of Nueva Loja (Sucumbios province) to the Balao OCP Marine Terminal and Esmeraldas Refinery in the coastal city of Esmeraldas.^[1] The pipeline traverses three natural regions of the country: Amazon, Sierra and Costa. It crosses the Andes mountain range near Virgen de Papallacta, where it reaches its maximum altitude of 4,064 meters.^[2]



Project Details

- Operator:** Petroecuador^[3]
- Current capacity:** 360,000 barrels per day^[3]
- Length:** 497.7 km / 309.3 mi^[3]
- Oil source:** Amazonas
- Status:** Operating
- Start Year:** 1972^{[3][4]}

Background

Shortly after the discovery of oil in the eastern portion of Ecuador in the Amazon region in 1967, the construction of the Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline system (SOTE) was planned. The pipeline commenced operations in 1972.^{[4][5]} The SOTE pipeline delivers crude from the Amazonas region to the Balao Terminal and Esmeraldas Refinery for export.^[2] The pipeline originally had a capacity of 250,000 bpd. Because of increased crude-oil production in the Oriente, pipeline capacity was raised to 300,000 b/d in 1985 and to 325,000 b/d in 1992 by installation of additional pumping units in the existing pump stations.^[6] The pipeline's current capacity is 360,000 b/d.^[7]

During 2021, Petroecuador was completing a series of small bypasses in an attempt to protect the pipeline from further river erosion.^[8]

In June 2022, the Ecuadorean government was ordered to pay \$10 million to Gente Oil for breaches of the contract for exploitation of the Singue field, including in regards to difficulties in transporting oil from the Singue field through SOTE pipelines.^[9]

Incidents and Spills

In 1987, two earthquakes measuring 6.1 and 6.9 in magnitude caused severe landslides near the El Reventador volcano. Approximately 6.5 miles of the pipeline was completely destroyed by the landslides and an additional 10 miles was damaged by mudflows. The pipeline bridge crossing the Aquarico River was swept away by the swollen river.^[10]

An explosion in December 2000 left many dead and injured as well as causing significant damage to the surrounding area.^[11]

A May 31, 2013 landslide ruptured the pipeline in the Andean foothills near the Reventador Volcano, dumping some 11,000 barrels worth -- 420,000 gallons -- of crude oil into the Coca River, which in turn flows into the Napo River, a major tributary of the Amazon. The spill subsequently threatened communities in both Brazil and Peru downstream. As it flowed downstream, the slick temporarily contaminated the drinking water of the 80,000 people living in the Ecuadorean city of Coca.^[12]

In April 2020, a landslide along the Río Coca in the Ecuadorian Amazon ruptured the pipeline, requiring construction of a new 1.75 km section to detour around the slide. Ecuador was forced to suspend oil exports for nearly a month as crews worked around the clock to clean up the spill and restore service by early May.^{[13][14]}

During June and July 2021, Petroecuador was working on a new route for the SOTE pipeline due to imminent erosion damage from the Coca River^[15] following the collapse of the San Rafael waterfall.^[16]

In early December 2021, the Ecuadorian government declared force majeure on all of its oil contracts as pipelines, including the SOTE, had to be shut down due to environmental concerns from erosion.^[17] Service on the pipeline was restored in late December 2021 following extensive repair work^[18], but Ecuadorian oil production was not expected to return to normal levels until February 2022.^[19] Meanwhile, in January 2022, a heavy crude oil pipeline burst in the same zone, causing the suspension of crude pumping.^{[20][21]} Water contaminated by the spill allegedly reached dozens of Indigenous Kichwa communities in the provinces of Napo and Sucumbíos.^[22]

Opposition

Indigenous communities impacted by the pipeline have been pushing back against the pipeline since 1970 for environmental, social, and spiritual reasons.^[11] However it should be noted that the long term presence of the pipeline has allowed for the integration of the pipeline into the everyday lives of community members such as serving as a walkway through the rainforest or as a more efficient drying rack for clothing.

In February 2006, protestors forced the temporary shutdown of the pipeline when they demanded Occidental Petroleum (USA) be expelled from the country.^[23]

In October 2019, Petroecuador suspended operations on the SOTE pipeline in response to widespread protests prompted by the government's decision to cancel fuel subsidies as part of an austerity package negotiated with the International Monetary Fund.^[1]

Environmentalists have long been concerned about the vulnerability of the SOTE oil pipeline and the neighboring OCP pipeline to earthquakes and landslides, citing the April 2020 rupture of both pipelines as evidence of the potential for serious ecological consequences.^[24] In August 2020, the indigenous communities impacted by the SOTE pipeline were calling for an immediate moratorium on all resource extraction during the pandemic.^[25]

On the anniversary of the April 2020 rupture, activists protested against the renewed activity of the SOTE and OCP pipelines due to the long term damages from the oil spill which was not adequately addressed.^[26]

In June 2022, Petroecuador again declared force majeure, halting all oil operations, in response to escalating protests by indigenous peoples against fuel and food price hikes and other economic policies of the government of Guillermo Lasso.^[27]

Articles and resources

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Coverage of erosion impact in San Luis, Ecuador - 2021

Derrame de petróleo contamina ...



Ecuadorian news coverage of SOTE pipeline spill - April 2020

SOTE | Programa 35 - Bloque 2 | ...



Ecuadorian news coverage of SOTE pipeline history - December 2014



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A Kichwa fisherman's testimony in the wake of a disastrous oil spill



In the Sani Isla commune in the Orellana province, Damary Mayerli Grefa shows the skin problems that were caused by contact with water contaminated by oil. Source: Ivan Castaneira, Agencia Tegantai (<https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-04-09/the-triple-pandemic-devastating-ecuadors-amazon-communities-after-an-oil-spill.html>)

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External resources

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