

Big Inch and Little Big Inch Crude Pipelines

U.S. Government



In 1941, a time when oil was transported mostly by tankers and railcars, the threat of German submarines along the east coast of the United States created the need for a more efficient and safer means of transporting United States oil. Following considerable debate among high-ranking defense and administration officials, the famous 300-Mbpd, 24-inch Big Inch and the 190-Mbpd, 20-inch Little Big Inch War Emergency Pipelines were programmed for construction by the government in June 1942. They were to be built to meet the urgent need for Gulf Coast and East Texas crude on the Eastern Seaboard and thereby eliminate the submarine menace to coastal operations.

Willbros, one of the few contractors with the experience required for lines this size, was named principal construction contractor for the Big Inch and Little Big Inch pipelines. The pipelines were 2,897 km (1,800 miles) long, extending from the Texas and Louisiana oil fields, and were capable of bringing 250 Mbpd to the East Coast—considerably more than the estimates of the daily shortage.

Willbros laid approximately 966 km (600 miles) of crude oil pipeline and constructed 15 pump stations. Willbros also installed all the river crossings from Texas to New Jersey because of the company's previous experience installing pipeline river crossings on nearly every major river in North America.

Oil began flowing out of the pipeline in December 1942 at Norris City, Illinois, at substantial savings over tanker or rail transport. A few months later, the final extension to Pennsylvania and New York was completed.

After the war, Willbros was appointed custodian of both the Big Inch and the Little Big Inch pipelines. As an agent of the government, the company later converted these lines to natural gas and, until their eventual sale, operated them while they were under lease to a private company.

*Project Award
June 1942*

*Project Completion
December 1942*

United States

