

Source: Energy and Climate Report: News Archive > 2015 > May > 05/15/2015 > News > Natural Gas: Better Transparency, Coordination Needed to Make Aging Pipelines Safer, Mayors Say

Natural Gas

Better Transparency, Coordination Needed to Make Aging Pipelines Safer, Mayors Say



By **Leslie A. Pappas**

May 15 — More data, increased transparency and better coordination at all levels are needed to solve risks in the nation's disjointed and aging pipeline system, speakers and conference participants told Bloomberg BNA at the first Mayor's Council on Pipeline Safety in Philadelphia on May 15.

"Without exception, every time we see something that goes wrong, somebody is out there who says, 'We knew about that problem, and we knew it was going to hurt somebody sooner or later,'" keynote speaker Christopher Hart, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, told the group.

More data, better communication, and public awareness are crucial, he said. "We have to get the system more effective at every level."

The gathering of elected officials, public regulators, pipeline workers, emergency responders and consultants was motivated by gas pipeline explosions that killed residents and destroyed homes in San Bruno, Calif., in 2010, and in Philadelphia and Allentown, Pa., in 2011.

"It's easy to identify a deteriorating bridge because it's rusty, and it's easy to notice a pothole because you drive over it, but pipelines are out of sight, out of mind," Jim Ruane, mayor of San Bruno, told Bloomberg BNA.

Eight residents in San Bruno were killed and 55 homes destroyed in September 2010 when a 30-inch gas transmission pipeline exploded in a residential neighborhood there .

"They're ticking time bombs under our cities," he said.

Need Seen to Map City Pipelines

Nathan Phillips, a professor of earth and environment at Boston University, told Bloomberg BNA that mapping a city's pipelines and creating a geographic information system (GIS) of a city's infrastructure could help city governments and utilities make cost-effective decisions about where to replace pipelines.

Most cities have a "mish-mash" underground with water pipes, gas pipes, sewer pipes and electrical transmission lines running around "like spaghetti" under the streets, he said.

In a study that mapped gas pipes in every city street in Boston, Phillips found 3,300 leaks in 785 miles of road. He joked that there is "environmental injustice for all" in that leaks occurred throughout the city.

Phillips said one key to strategic repair would be a complete GIS map of a city's infrastructure that would show the age of the pipe, the material it's made of, the roads and electrical systems.

"Then find the worst of the worst. Those are the biggest opportunities to save money and solve" many problems at once, he said.

One-Size-Fits-All Doesn't Work

Timothy P. Butters, deputy administrator of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), told Bloomberg BNA that it's difficult to put out a single federal regulation that would cover all pipelines because systems vary so much from place to place.

Also, he said, "some operators may not have good information about their own systems" because they were installed so many years ago or the data have been lost.

Federal regulations implemented in 2010 under the Distribution Integrity Management Program now require utilities to survey their system, map gas leaks and submit an annual report to PHMSA, pipeline consultant Richard B. Kuprewicz, president of Accufacts Inc., told Bloomberg BNA

"You now have data to see the trends," said Kuprewicz, who has done research for the mayor's council. Data about the leaks isn't required to be made public, but now that data are being gathered, public utility commissions could demand that utilities turn over maps whenever they ask for a rate increase, Kuprewicz said.

National Map Said Needed

BNA Snapshot

Key Development: The Mayor's Council on Pipeline Safety holds its first meeting in Philadelphia.

Key Finding: More data are needed to address risks in the nation's aging system.

Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski expressed frustration that there is no national map that shows all gas pipelines, including transmission, distribution and gathering pipelines.

More than four years after a 12-inch, 1928 cast iron distribution pipeline exploded in his city and killed five people, "I still can't get the gas companies to tell me where the gas lines are," he told Bloomberg BNA.

In 2011, it took six hours to figure out where the shut-off valves were located, which allowed a fire to continue to burn, he said. And in February, 100 homes were evacuated because residents smelled gas and no one knew where to shut it off, he said.

"It's appalling," he said. "We have the technology. There's no reason we can't figure out where these gas lines are.

"My theory is that they don't know where all the gas line are," he added. "And if that's true, that's scary."

To contact the reporter on this story: [Leslie A. Pappas](mailto:lpappas@bna.com) in Philadelphia at lpappas@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Larry Pearl at lpearl@bna.com

Contact us at <http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html> or call 1-800-372-1033

Copyright © 2015, The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. Reproduction or redistribution, in whole or in part, and in any form, without express written permission, is prohibited except as permitted by the BNA Copyright Policy.
<http://www.bna.com/corp/index.html#V>