



Energy Master Plan Favors Increasing and Extending NJ's Natural Gas Pipelines

According to the plan, expanding the state's natural gas infrastructure will lower heating costs and reduce electric bills

By **Tom Johnson**, **June 9** in **Energy & Environment**

In New Jersey, there are more than 1,500 miles of interstate transmission pipelines crisscrossing much of the state, buried under densely populated cities, traversing largely rural areas, and, in one case, snaking through more than a dozen state and federal parks and wildlife management areas.

Expect to hear about a lot more projects in the future.

The new Energy Master Plan (EMP) unveiled by the Christie administration this week says the state is committed to expanding its natural gas infrastructure, a step the report says could lead to lower home heating costs for customers and lower electric bills for ratepayers.

"New or expanded pipelines will confer energy price benefits by increasing the supply of lower-cost gas from the Marcellus Shale, thus reducing the wholesale cost of gas and power" for electric power suppliers and electric utilities, the plan said.

There are five major pipeline expansion projects in the works in New Jersey, but even with the discovery of abundant supplies of natural gas in the Marcellus Shale regions of Pennsylvania and New York, industry experts doubt all of them will be built.

That is of little solace to critics of the projects, including many environmental groups, some of whom have had little success in fighting a 41-mile expansion of the Tennessee Gas Pipeline through the heart of the New Jersey Highlands, as well as an expansion of a high-voltage transmission line there, too.

"It was an uphill battle before," said Elliot Ruga, campaign and grassroots coordinator for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. "That hill just got a lot steeper."

Industry executives, however, say their projects will relieve bottlenecks that prevent customers from receiving the benefits of extending the pipelines

"From an environmental standpoint, we're not a greenfield pipeline," said Chris Stockton, a spokesman for the Williams Company, the owner of Transco. The 6.8-mile pipeline is merely running along an existing right-of-way, which will help facilitate the transportation of natural gas from Pennsylvania into the New York and New Jersey metropolitan markets, Stockton said.

"It's a very important solution to a lot of the energy issues out there," he said.

The plan also argued that extending interstate pipelines for natural gas to the market center of New Jersey offers the state significant leverage to reduce its reliance on more expensive diesel fuel for transportation and home heating oil in the winter.

Ruga said his organization has two crucial issues with the expansion of natural gas pipelines: not only do they cut further ribbons through swaths of protected forests, but also they promote further drilling in the Marcellus Shale.

Natural gas is extracted from the Marcellus Shale through a process called hydraulic fracturing or "fracking," a drilling technique that involves injecting huge volumes of water into the shale to extract the fuel. Environmentalists worry it could taint the water supplies from the Delaware River, which furnishes drinking water to 1.5 million people.

If the Highlands pipeline projects are approved, Ruga is concerned they could affect the drinking water of 5 million New Jerseyans. Because the Highlands is protected, New Jersey enjoys the fourth-lowest water rates in the nation, Ruga said. He questioned whether it is worth sacrificing an increase in water rates for a decrease in natural gas costs.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, expressed some of the same concerns about the expansion of the pipelines in the state.

"It means an expansion of fracking, which this administration has been weak on," he said. It also will transfer ratepayers dollars to firms in the Southwest, instead of renewable energy companies trying to develop clean energy initiatives in New Jersey."

Pipeline expansion projects also have come under fire in urban areas, particularly in Jersey City where a proposal to build 16 miles of new pipeline from Staten Island to Jersey City and then back into New York City is fiercely opposed by residents, who raise safety and health concerns. The project is being developed by Spectra Energy, a Houston-based natural gas infrastructure company.