

## **Pipeline taps residents' fears**

### **Hundreds worry about a gas line's effect on their land and environment**

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A chorus of concerns rang out this week as landowners along the snaking route of a proposed natural gas pipeline showed signs of organizing to oppose the line and liquefied natural gas terminals along the lower Columbia River.

Several hundred landowners, farmers, advocates and concerned residents aired their complaints at public meetings this week in Maupin, Molalla, McMinnville and, on Thursday, Forest Grove. The towns sit along the proposed route of the Palomar pipeline, which would connect a planned LNG terminal near Astoria with an interstate transmission line that runs through central Oregon to California.

Douglas Sipe, a project manager from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, was the man behind the lectern and thus the stand-in punching bag for both his agency and the private companies that want to build the terminal and pipeline.

Most speakers expressed deep misgivings about the agency's ability to deal with associated threats to people, wildlife, farmland and the environment.

Tuesday night's meeting in Molalla was raucous.

"Emotions were running high," Sipe said. "It was hard for me to say anything to make people happy."

Wednesday's meeting in McMinnville was lower key, if no less heartfelt. Ilsa Perse, a landowner from Carlton, told Sipe that it was increasingly difficult to discriminate between where the federal government ends and private companies begin.

"California told these companies to take a hike, and I find it a little weird that we now get the special privilege" of hosting them in Oregon, Perse said.

The Palomar pipeline is actually a joint venture between Northwest Natural Gas Co., the state's largest gas utility, and TransCanada Pipelines Ltd., which owns an interstate pipeline that runs through central Oregon to California.

Palomar is one of two proposed pipelines that would connect planned LNG terminals on the lower Columbia River to TransCanada's line in central Oregon. The second would connect to the planned Bradwood Landing LNG terminal 20

miles upriver from Astoria. Both pipelines would run through Clatsop, Washington, Yamhill, Marion, Clackamas and Wasco counties. A third LNG terminal is being considered in Coos Bay, with a pipeline that runs to near the California border.

Supporters of the LNG projects and pipelines contend that the new gas supply and pipelines would bolster economic development and protect the region from price shocks as domestic and Canadian gas supplies get tighter.

Yet the California question looms large over all of the projects. Critics say Oregon's gas needs are a fraction of the proposed terminals' capacity. They worry that the state is a back door for shipping foreign fossil fuels to its southern neighbor, where gas prices are higher and citizens have helped block LNG proposals.

Palomar backers and the company bankrolling the Bradwood Landing LNG terminal, Houston-based NorthernStar Natural Gas, Inc., don't even like to associate the two projects together in public for fear that opposition to one will infect the other.

NW Natural's rationale for Palomar is to diversify its customers' supply of natural gas. Even if the LNG terminal is never built, the Portland company says it wants to build the section of Palomar that links its distribution hub in Molalla, southeast of Portland, with TransCanada's interstate line in central Oregon.

NW Natural says such a link has been contemplated for the past 15 years. Palomar officials maintain that the company can rationalize extending the pipeline farther west to serve growing areas of Washington County that NW Natural doesn't serve today.

Critics remain skeptical. They contend the local gas monopoly, constrained by the slow growth of its regulated business, wants a piece of the lucrative interstate gas trade, which would complement its growing natural gas storage facilities in Mist, near the LNG terminal.

Opponents of the projects maintain that a high-pressure, 36-inch pipe crossing the Cascades -- one costing hundreds of millions of dollars -- doesn't make economic sense if NW Natural isn't moving vast quantities of gas from an LNG terminal each day.

"There's no credible, straight-faced argument that these projects are being driven by Oregon's needs," said Brent Foster, an advocate with Columbia Riverkeepers.

Sipe, the FERC project manager, acknowledged the concerns over California at the public meetings, but he said the Palomar pipeline and the LNG terminal at Bradwood would be evaluated separately since the owners intend to build them

regardless of whether the other project is approved. He also confirmed many landowners' fears when he acknowledged Wednesday night in McMinnville that they "won't necessarily have a vote" on the pipeline, even if it runs across their land.

But Sipe stressed that the public input would help shape the agency's environmental analyses of the project, which is a key piece of its approval process.

Many landowners fear the property and environmental damage that could come with a 50- to 100-foot right-of-way across their property. Their concerns range from the increased risk of wildfire and introduction of noxious weeds to destruction of valuable farm and timberland. Many wonder who will pay their attorneys' fees and the property taxes on land that is no longer productive, or whether they can push the pipeline into existing public right-of-ways.

Landowners along the pipeline route are forming local chapters of a group they call Oregon Citizens Against the Pipeline.

Jody Hawkins, a landowner from Yamhill, told Sipe on Wednesday that his kids play on a baseball diamond 30 feet from the proposed pipeline route and his house sits 200 feet away.

"If a 36-inch gas line (explodes), my house is gone, my kids are gone," Hawkins said.

This week's meetings aren't the only chance for the public to provide input on the project. They can write or provide electronic comments to the agency until Nov 28. FERC will hold another round of hearings after it issues a draft environmental impact statement in June, Sipe said.

"They can think what they want about the federal government," Sipe said. "But we're out there trying to protect the public while providing the infrastructure that the nation needs."