

COGCC pushes rule revisions on flowlines to February

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DENVER — Rulemaking to revise Colorado's regulation of underground pipes was continued without a decision Tuesday when two days of testimony raised new questions about how much flowline data is needed, who collects it and what gets shared.

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission held the hearing Monday and Tuesday to take note of questions and concerns from local governments, oil and gas opponents, the industry and from the public on proposed revisions to the section of regulations that apply to flowlines.

Flowlines are the first pipes in the network of mostly underground lines that move fluids, both water and oil, and natural gas produced from the well to temporary storage, to other well sites or processing facilities. Efforts to tighten the flowline rules were intensified following an April house explosion in Firestone that killed two men and injured a woman.

Matt Lapore, director of the COGCC, said on Monday that the Firestone accident was unusual and might never occurred had the original flowline been properly abandoned according to rules in place at the time the original well was shut-in.

"Human error was a factor," Lapore said. "I don't think we can write rules that prevent human error. If someone had cut off the abandoned riser below grade, you eliminate the opportunity to connect something that shouldn't be connected."

Responding to repeated requests that all flowlines be mapped and their exact location be made available online, Lapore said there already exists a system to provide the public, and landowners specifically, with information about what pipes and underground infrastructure might traverse a plot.

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The commission and industry have maintained that the COGCC is not the right organization for collecting, organizing and disseminating information about flowlines. Rather, Colorado's 811 One Call center is more appropriate for that task, he said.

However, calls for readily available information on flowlines as well as new regulation of the pipelines that connect local oil production with larger lines and are referred to as crude transfer lines, was a common theme during much of the testimony heard on Monday.

"The risk to public safety is clear," said Sara Loflin, executive director of the League of Oil and Gas Impacted Coloradans. "After Firestone, we can no longer say that drilling in neighborhoods or existing oil facilities in developing neighborhoods is not risking public safety. We are asking for greater transparency and access to information."

Local governments along the Front Range echoed the concern that lack of information about flowlines represents an ongoing risk to communities.

Testimony on Tuesday could not have been more different. Where Monday's hearing involved calls for mapping from local town and county governments and from opponents to oil and gas development, Tuesday's testimony from industry included some surprises and quite a bit of haggling over language.

The second day of testimony began with a clarification of the role of the state's 811 One Call program. Jose Espino, director of operations at the Utility Notification Center of Colorado, told the board that the call center "is not a repository of data" and that it does not provide the precise location of underground pipelines.

"Anyone can request a line locate service but we don't provide mapping data and, we are prohibited from sharing any information we have other than verbally over the phone," Espino said.

When an excavator or property owner calls to request a line locate, the call center notifies the utility or pipeline owner shown on their records, he said. "Otherwise, we send one of the line locate services that have signed up as contractors."

Later, two lengthy sessions of industry testimony raised questions about protection of state primacy over oil and gas placement, requests that flowlines be removed when abandoned, how to properly register flowlines and their ownership, and how many and where to locate pipeline isolation valves.

PDC Energy alone currently operates an estimated 70,000 isolation valves in the DJ Basin, based on the definition of such valves included in the revisions, according to

Brian Murray, and engineering director at the company.

"Inspection of these valves per the rule could involved shutting down the entire field," Murray said. "A performance standard for managing a large system like our makes more sense than a prescriptive rule like this."

What's next?

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission will take up the issue of flow line regulations at its next hearing, scheduled for Feb. 13 in Denver.
