

Massachusetts Takes the Lead on Leak Repairs

By

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The Patriot Ledger recently ran an article about gas leaks. Readers should be pleased to know that the Commonwealth has already taken the lead on addressing and upgrading the state's natural gas system.

Natural gas is an important part of the Commonwealth's energy supply, providing 50% of home heating and 50% of electric power generation. Strengthening the system, including repairing of leaks, is a central part of the state's responsible energy planning.

Last June, the Massachusetts Legislature unanimously enacted a bill on "natural gas leaks." It clarified the schedule for the state's natural gas utilities to repair leaks, and advanced the timeline for fixing and/or evaluating leaks.

Leaks can be caused by numerous factors – including the age of the pipe, internal corrosion, or damage by a third party - when someone accidentally strikes an underground pipe during construction, for example.

The recent legislation is comprehensive and aggressive with requirements and timelines that all the state's gas utilities must meet. The utilities are regulated by the state's Department of Public Utilities and must provide annual, detailed reports on the status of their systems.

The 2014 legislation also included a provision on accelerating the rate of replacing older pipe considered more "leak-prone" – cast-iron and bare steel. Massachusetts does have one of the oldest gas systems in the U.S., so accelerating replacement of older pipe is a sound policy for public safety, economic and environmental reasons. The utilities submitted plans to the DPU earlier this year and are implementing replacement programs today.

Fixing leaks is important and a priority for the gas utilities. Reducing the number of risky leaks also reduces safety risks. The state's gas safety record is very strong - and strengthening the system structure is a positive step.

Fixing leaks and replacing leak-prone pipes also reduces emissions into the air of methane. The amount of methane gas lost through leaks in Massachusetts is not substantial – the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates it at 0.5% of total gas consumed statewide, and a recent study for the MA DPU found that for the gas utilities studied, "methane emissions range from 0.6 to 1.1 percent of total gas received."

Even so, reducing methane emissions is important to the Commonwealth and to the gas utilities.

Massachusetts has a sound legislative and regulatory policy in place on natural gas leaks and the utilities are investing in system improvements. As President Obama said just a few years ago in regards to his

Climate Action Plan: “investments to build and upgrade gas pipelines will not only put more Americans to work, but also reduce emissions and enhance economic productivity.”

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