

NGA Editorial:
Many Good Arguments for More Natural Gas

By

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Massachusetts and New England need to increase the region's ability to access low cost, environmentally compatible natural gas supplies.

Natural gas use has been growing strongly in the region over the last several years. Now it is time to expand the region's pipeline delivery capabilities, to meet current and projected demand for natural gas from homeowners and businesses alike.

Pipeline projects proposed for Massachusetts and New England are currently in the regulatory process. The Northeast Gas Association (NGA), a trade association representing the natural gas utilities in Massachusetts, including Berkshire Gas, wants to affirm our support for adding more natural gas infrastructure over the next few years. It is truly vital to our energy supply, power system reliability, economic growth, and environmental sustainability.

The local natural gas utilities in Massachusetts have added thousands of customers in recent years and the outlook is for further growth. Parts of our Commonwealth have had to impose restrictions on adding new gas utility customers because the current infrastructure in certain areas is full. Without new infrastructure, people and businesses that want new gas service will have to be turned away. This limits growth, costs both existing and potential jobs, and slows the regional economy.

Each year, the utilities submit their supply and growth plans to the state regulatory authority for review and approval. Utilities need to demonstrate projected needs on their systems and how they will meet that demand. New pipeline capacity is key to how gas utilities will meet growth and maintain reliability and affordability.

At the same time, Massachusetts natural gas utilities – such as Berkshire Gas - continue to invest in energy efficiency programs. Massachusetts has about 2% of all U.S. natural gas customers, but represents 12% of all U.S. natural gas utility dollars invested in energy efficiency programs. We are investing dollars well above the national average to ensure that natural gas is used efficiently in homes and businesses.

We are well aware in New England that new infrastructure projects face opposition, from wind turbines to gas pipelines. We need however to plan for a balance of energy resources and efficiency investments to make our region economically viable and environmentally secure.

All project proposals must and should undergo close environmental review. When in operation, all infrastructure is held to rigorous standards and regulatory oversight. We are confident that natural gas

projects will continue to be both safe and environmentally compatible, as their history in the Commonwealth demonstrates.

The underreported story is that the environmental performance of the region has improved and keeps improving... and natural gas is a key contributor to that positive result. The region's electric grid operator recently reported that since the year 2001, air emissions from the regional electric power grid have decreased in a major way – sulfur dioxide down by 94%, nitrous oxide down by 66%, and carbon dioxide reduced by 26%. This is real progress. This success is due to the addition of renewables, and to greater efficiency, but most of all to natural gas replacing other fossil fuels in the electric mix.

At the natural gas utility level, environmental progress is also being achieved. Thanks to comprehensive natural gas legislation enacted by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2014, the pace of system upgrades is increasing. Older, more leak-prone gas pipe components, such as cast iron and bare steel, are being replaced with newer, more efficient systems. This will reduce leaks and strengthen system safety. Also, converting more homes and businesses from oil to natural gas will help the Commonwealth meet its climate performance goals.

The Massachusetts natural gas system is already showing great improvements in terms of its greenhouse gas impact. Earlier this year, the state's Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretariat released a report on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the Commonwealth. Natural gas systems accounted for 2.6% of all state GHG emissions in 1990; by 2012, this had dropped in half, to just 1.3%. Over the same period, methane emissions in Massachusetts dropped by 62%. This is substantial progress.

More can be done – and more will be done to improve the environment. But the natural gas performance has been positive.

Finally, more natural gas is needed for the electric power system in the region. Natural gas provides about half of all power generation now. It is the proposed fuel for two-thirds of all planned power plants in the region, and will serve to back-up intermittent renewable sources as they increase their role on the system. More natural gas for power means greater reliability and lower price volatility.

In short, more natural gas makes great sense for Massachusetts, New England, the environment, the economy, and the citizens of our region.

Tom Kiley is president and CEO of the Northeast Gas Association (NGA), based in Needham. Article was published March 7, 2016 in The Berkshire Eagle.