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Natural gas providing more jobs, less carbon

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Across Massachusetts, yellow high-performance natural-gas piping is getting lined up along streets, ready for installation underground as the state's gas industry continues its multibillion-dollar overhaul of this critical energy network.

This important upgrading of the commonwealth's natural gas system will help maintain high system-safety standards, promote efficiency, and reduce the potential for gas leaks. In fact, the state's three biggest natural gas utilities are upgrading more than 250 miles of metal gas pipe this year, replacing them with non-corroding yellow polyethylene (i.e., plastic) lines — enough to stretch from Boston to Pittsfield and back to Worcester.

In a state full of aging infrastructure that needs upgrading and modernizing, gas utilities are leading the way, steadily substituting older lines every year in close consultation with local public-works officials and creating hundreds of well-paying jobs for utility workers and contractors and meeting demand for clean-burning natural gas.

Since 2000, gas utilities have added more than 200,000 new customers in Massachusetts. Residents and businesses are choosing natural gas because it is affordable and reliable. Today, more than half of all Massachusetts homes and businesses count on natural gas.

For years, the natural gas industry and the Massachusetts Legislature have been collaborating on replacing leak-prone pipes and associated gas leaks. Legislation enacted in 2014 allows natural gas utilities to work closely with the Department of Public Utilities on improved systems for reporting and repairs. Safety will always be the industry's highest priority, and we continue to work with legislators to address reduction of emissions.

The industry is proud of what our crews have accomplished. From 2010 through 2015, federal data shows that Massachusetts' biggest utilities have installed more than 3,200 miles of state-of-the-art, leak-resistant plastic mains and distribution lines. During the same period, we removed nearly 1,130 miles of leak-prone steel mains and distribution lines and some 680 miles of cast-iron mains and distribution lines.

Taken together, these pipeline upgrades stretch the length of 24 Massachusetts Turnpikes. Nearly half of the state's gas distribution lines and two-thirds of service lines are state-of-the-art, high-performance plastic.

But we're not done. Our utilities will steadily accelerate upgrades in coming years, with a five-year goal of replacing, annually, 40 percent more leak-prone pipes than were upgraded in 2016.

State Department of Environmental Protection data shows what an impact we're having: Over the last 25 years, the industry has reduced methane emissions by 67 percent and our share of greenhouse gas emissions by more than 50 percent. Today, natural gas systems account for just 1.1 percent of the state's total greenhouse gas emissions.

The ongoing construction season will keep Massachusetts' gas line crews busy on the job, in densely built urban areas and along the highway in stay-safe work zones. These men and women are building on years of progress to deliver the commonwealth a better energy future that is safer, cleaner, and ever more reliable.

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