

VOICES

Victory Over InFRACK structure, Clean Energy in Stead

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200 Groups Nationwide call for Moratorium on Pipeline Construction & Approvals During COVID-19 Crisis

Concerns over COVID-19 spread and strain on emergency and medical resources mount as industry oversight is relaxed

A letter signed by over 200 organizations points to a dangerous trend that communities from across the country are witnessing in fear-- federal regulators are curtailing oversight and enforcement of industrial construction and environmental, health, and safety protections, while construction of natural gas pipelines and LNG export facilities continue under government exemption. The letter makes a desperate plea to the country's top decisionmakers to place a moratorium on the construction and approval of shale-gas pipeline projects and LNG export facilities during the pandemic to protect against the spread of COVID-19 and to ensure emergency and medical services are not unnecessarily taxed. The organizations behind the letter represent over 8.7 million people around the country.

While people across the country are being asked to shelter in place and nonessential businesses are told to shut down in face of the pandemic, construction of pipelines and LNG export facilities continues. Federal regulators have also announced drastic cutbacks in protective rules, oversight, and enforcement in order to protect their staffers and inspectors. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have both announced relaxation of environmental rules and enforcement, leaving already overtaxed state officials to investigate and respond when safety and environmental laws are violated. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) issued a stay on enforcement for pipeline and LNG facilities relaxing employee qualification standards, training mandates and drug testing, with further rule relaxation anticipated. Relaxed regulations will put communities at risk. Natural gas pipeline construction and operation in the United States results in an average of 100 accidents, incidents, and explosions every year, inflicting injury and death and causing over \$1.2 million in damages under normal regulatory conditions.

"Removing oversight, training, drug checks, staffing and monitoring mandates," while industrial pipeline construction activities are allowed to continue under exception, "will increase the likelihood of accidents and explosions, increasing the risk of catastrophic health, safety and environmental incidents putting communities in increased jeopardy and emergency resources further overwhelmed," the letter warns.

At the same time that projects are advancing, the public participation process is being severely compromised by quarantine and shelter in place restrictions on communities. Vulnerable communities are also expressing concerns that pipeline construction workers are crossing state lines and that workers may not be able or willing to adhere to social distancing requirements on the work site, raising the risk of COVID-19 community spread and stress on already or soon-to-be overburdened emergency and medical services. The letter included pictures documenting pipeline workers working on the Mountain Valley pipeline in close proximity at the end of March.

There are also concerns that the unchecked approvals and advancement of major fossil fuel infrastructure projects during the national emergency are exacerbating the ongoing climate crisis. The growing existential threat of climate change will increase spread of viruses like COVID-19, communicable diseases, parasites and bacteria by extending their breeding seasons and accelerating their geographical expansion.

“While the interests of the public are being set aside, the goals of industry and development projects are being held in unprecedented regard. There is no good reason why a pipeline company should be able to continue construction in the face of a global pandemic. These projects put the environment, local communities, and the workers at risk. People’s ability to participate in the public comment and meeting process are curtailed by the COVID-19 crisis, yet industry is allowed to advance its interests under relaxed oversight. These actions will not only harm efforts to curtail the current health crisis, but will also impact another crisis we’re facing, the climate crisis. It is time for a moratorium on shale gas pipeline and LNG export projects,” said **Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper and leader of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network.**

"How decisionmakers handle the continued expansion of fracked gas infrastructure during and after this pandemic will tell us what we can anticipate as the climate crisis intensifies. A moratorium will signal that they not only understand that pipelines and LNG are anything but essential projects, but that the shale gas development they enable, if not rapidly phased out, will contribute to more debilitating and deadly calamities," said **Karen Feridun, Founder of Berks Gas Truth.**

“Global oil demand is falling dramatically — the first full-year decline in more than a decade. While the continuing projected downturn relates in some part to fallout from the outbreak of COVID-19, it is also tied to more persistent, structural issues weighing against oil production, like slowing economic growth and OPEC members’ decision to increase overall output and depress prices, and the impatience of investors with the poor returns from O&G exploration and production. Given the menacing level of financial viability of many U.S. shale oil producers it is contrary to the public interest for the BLM to continue leasing sales at this time,” said **Mariel Nanasi, Executive Director for New Energy Economy.**

“The construction of pipelines is not a business essential for health and safety and pipeline construction should not be an exception to the Coronavirus rules now in effect in most states. Pipelines attract out of state workers from the southwest to work in virus hot zones on the east coast—yet another source of

spreading the virus. Pipeline construction is only “essential” to the bottom line of fossil fuel companies,” said **Linda Christman, President of Save Carbon County.**

“Hastily built pipelines with inadequate inspections and oversight have greatly increased the danger of fracked gas pipelines since 2010. Now we are being told that because of the risk of transmission of Covid-19 and the reduced resources for pipeline construction and oversight, we are supposed to accept substantially LESS oversight and MORE risk from unneeded pipelines, LNG and export facilities?? Siting, construction and permitting of such facilities already disproportionately impacts poorer communities and communities of color. This PHMSA gutting of its regulations will put everyone close to these facilities at greater risk, but especially the most vulnerable communities, deepening the injustices they already face. The solution is clear: stop the construction of pipelines and LNG facilities that aren’t needed and will be even more dangerous under an agency that has abdicated its responsibilities,” said **Hope Taylor, Executive Director, Clean Water for North Carolina.**

“Since the announcement of the COVID-19 state of emergency in Massachusetts, we’ve not only seen the continuation of construction on Enbridge’s Weymouth compressor station, but the commencement of construction of Tennessee Gas’ compressor station expansion and other infrastructure on the other end of the state in Agawam. Work has continued despite other non-essential businesses being ordered to close. This is despite there being so few customers for the Enbridge project and essentially no current customers for the Tennessee Gas project. These work crews are putting these communities at risk, not following work stoppage and social distancing guidelines,” said **Rosemary Wessel, Program Director for No Fracked Gas in Mass.**

“Here in Massachusetts, the Governor’s policies under the COVID-19 crisis demonstrate his antithesis to #healthoverwealth or more specifically #ourhealthoverhiswealth” by his continued commitment to advancing his financial investments by permitting and protecting continued construction of the Enbridge compressor station In Weymouth MA. This compressor is intended to transport fracked gas from the Marcellus up to Canada for sale on the international market. The construction site and incineration zone are within feet of residential neighborhoods in Weymouth, a city marred by a despicable industrial history of chemical waste and correlated high clusters of cancer and other toxin related diseases. On March 25, 2020, Robert C. Ross, Chief Legal Counsel to Governor Baker issued so called “guidance” regarding Baker’s previous March 23, 2020 COVID-19 Order assuring continued essential services in the commonwealth. Under the guise of “Unitary Management”/”unified statewide directives in a time of crisis” the March 25 statement invoked the MA Civil Defense Act to overrule and render inoperative the rational decisions and authority of Mayors including of Boston and Somerville to halt construction projects to protect public health by limiting the spreading COVID-19 between and among construction workers and residents. The guidance [read: order] specifically and outrageously permits the continued compressor construction. This means that despite public outcry and the support of Senators Warren, Marky and Kennedy among many others to immediately stop compressor construction, the Commonwealth plans to observe a “safety stand down day” at each construction site to ensure workers are familiar with safety practices and to install wash stations and demonstrate risk prevention. In fact no wash stations being installed nor are proper precautions being implemented or observed at the Weymouth Compressor construction site. As I write this Statement, COVID-19 cases are exponentially rising in MA. We must head and amplify this urgent call for unity to halt pipeline

infrastructure construction now and hasten our rapid transition to a sustainable equitable energy and economic future for all people and all life on earth," said **Jennifer Wexler, President, Canton Residents for a Sustainable Equitable Future**

"Witnessing the taking of private land without any public process, oversight or public benefit is disturbing in the midst of the threat of the CoronaVirus and shelter in place and stop work orders. Why is Kinder Morgan allowed to continue to build the Permian Highway Pipeline that threatens our drinking water in the Trinity and Edwards Aquifers and the beautiful Blanco River and Cypress Creek?" asked **David Baker, Executive Director of Wimberley Valley Watershed Association**. "The continued construction activities of the Permian Highway Pipeline and the man camps threaten the health of the workers and local communities through the spread of the Covid19 Virus. Kinder Morgan should stop work immediately for the safety of their workers and our communities."

"This issue is not about whether the pipeline should be finished or should not be finished. It is about the risk they are bringing to our rural communities. Unless local, state and/or federal officials act promptly, we face an influx of hundreds of out-of-state workers that would be highly likely to carry the corona virus and place our already vulnerable population at even greater risk," said **Maury Johnson, Board of Director member of Preserve Monroe and Executive Committee Member of the POWHR Coalition**.

"There is a connection between the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and fossil fuel pipeline expansion that destroys forests, woods and wild areas. Right now there is a connection between continuing that expansion and fueling the pandemic. We need to stop right now any new pipeline/infrastructure expansion, and we need to move rapidly to shift from polluting and forest destroying energy sources like gas and oil to clean, renewable energy sources like wind, solar and battery storage," said **Ted Glick, Beyond Extreme Energy**.

"It is of tremendous concern to residents along the path of the Mountain Valley Pipeline and Atlantic Coast Pipeline that pipeline construction has been inexplicably dubbed "essential business" when there are strict restrictions in place to control the spread of Covid-19. Communities who have suffered abuse for years are now facing further invasion by contagion. As if these threats were not enough, finding out that PHMSA is relaxing employee qualification standards, training mandates and drug testing during this crisis seems as if they're trying to make a terribly pressurized emergency even more dangerous when their job is supposed to be keeping the public safe. How in the world could this be perceived as "safe" behavior? All fossil fuel extraction, construction and exportation should be halted immediately. Anything less would be adding unnecessary and absolutely unacceptable risk during a time when everyone's lives are at stake." **Mara Robbins, a founding member of Preserve Floyd and project director for 1000 flags / 1000 waters**, has protected water and fought fracked gas pipelines in Virginia and beyond for nearly six years. She currently works with XR Richmond, a chapter of the global Extinction Rebellion movement, who have turned their attention to mutual aid, community resilience and regenerative culture under the current circumstances.

"North Carolina is under siege from Duke Energy, Dominion Energy and their subsidiaries which are building huge pipelines, LNG storage facilities, cracker plants, compressor stations, Renewable Natural

Gas facilities (hog waste to methane production) and other projects which disproportionately target low income, minority and indigenous communities in the eastern part of the state which have been hardest hit by multiple destructive superstorms.. These construction projects must cease during this pandemic, and their permits be reviewed by appropriate state authorities,” said **Steven Norris, Vice President, Alliance to Protect the People and the Places We Live (APPPL)** in Fairview, North Carolina.

"Here in Brooklyn, NY, the current epicenter of COVID-19, we were able to shut down pipeline construction only by documenting workers on top of each other inside a trench in our streets contrary to the National Grid's reports that workers were practicing CDC recommended distancing. Workers told us they were concerned about catching the virus but had no choice. We were then able to take this footage to our local elected officials who had to shame National Grid in a recorded telephone conference to halt construction. It is imperative we make a national decision to honor workers, and our national health and safety, and shut down any and all fossil fuel construction work immediately," said **Kim Fraczek Director, Sane Energy Project.**

“Given that the NRC Office of Inspector General recently confirmed that a valid, federally-required risk assessment has not been conducted, there should also be a moratorium on the flow of gas in the damaged Algonquin pipelines at Indian Point nuclear facility,” said **Amy Rosmarin, co-founder, Stop the Algonquin Pipeline Expansion.**

“Well before this market crash, we already knew that there was no future in oil and gas. Continuing to build pipelines in these communities under the guise of revitalizing economies is peddling a cruel fantasy that the pipelines will bring sustainable jobs and better lives. Instead, the continued expansion and construction will bring more pollution, increased disease risk, and long-term harm to at-risk communities already reeling from the direct impacts of COVID-19. We call upon decisionmakers to halt construction of and deny approval for all shale-gas pipeline projects and liquified natural gas export facilities during this crisis,” said **Jane Patton, Senior Campaigner for the Center for International Environmental Law.**

“Plowing money into new fracking pipelines and fossil fuel export facilities was an awful idea long before the COVID pandemic hit. Now it would simply be unconscionable to dedicate any resources to build new dirty energy projects. This crisis is revealing that there are urgent, unmet needs across the country. We must work to repair the systems that are essential to life, not build new projects that bring us one step closer to the climate crisis,” said **Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director of Food & Water Action.**

Read the letter here: <https://bit.ly/PRVOICESCOVIDLtr>

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