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Nevada's new surveying requirements increase detection of intrastate natural gas pipeline leaks

Nevada is the first state to require annual leak surveys

Carson City, Nev. – New pipeline safety regulations that the Public Utilities Commission of Nevada (PUCN) approved in 2021 have significantly increased the detection of gas pipeline leaks and improved pipeline safety.

PUCN regulations now require leak detection surveys at least once each calendar year at intervals not exceeding 15 months for all intrastate systems transporting natural gas or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). The leak surveys conducted in 2023, which marked the first year of expanded annual inspection requirements, found approximately 242 hazardous leaks that otherwise might have gone undetected had an annual leak survey rule not been adopted. Additionally, Nevada gas utilities found approximately 526 non-hazardous leaks that were also identified and corrected. The hazardous and non-hazardous leaks were detected in areas that previously would not have been inspected until 2024 and 2025.

With the PUCN's adoption of annual leak surveys for all distribution systems, Nevada became the first state in the nation to apply such a standard to every type, vintage, and mile of distribution pipe.

Current federal regulations require operators to conduct annual leak detection only in "business districts" within a utility's service area; however, the regulations do not define "business districts." Previously in Nevada, utilities were responsible for determining what areas are considered "business districts," but that determination was not uniform across utilities and led to variations in how operators determined which properties should be subject to annual leak surveys. In areas outside of business districts, federal regulations require leak detection surveys at least once every five years.

By requiring annual leak detection surveys on all distribution systems transporting natural gas or LPG, the inspections ensure that all business and residential areas are surveyed in a timely manner. Identifying leaks sooner reduces the risk of injury and property damage from an explosion due to a hazardous gas leak. Additionally, proponents of the inspections highlight that quicker detection benefits the environment by lowering methane emissions.

"The data proves that this regulation results in a triple win – annual leak detection surveys improve safety, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by finding leaks much sooner than they would have been found on the five-year requirement, and create more jobs in Nevada because surveys require people to walk the gas lines during inspections, a task that cannot be outsourced," said Paul Maguire, PUCN Regulatory Engineering Manager.

The operators affected by this regulation include NV Energy, Southwest Gas Corporation, Wendover Gas Co. and Amerigas Propane, L.P. The cost of damages from some gas incidents across the country has reached tens of millions of dollars, the PUCN's Regulatory Operations Staff (Staff) noted in its 2019 petition proposing the annual leak detection surveys. Avoiding just one such incident represents an instant payback compared to the increased costs of mandating annual leak detection surveys, Staff said.

For more information about the investigation and rulemaking proceeding, visit the PUCN website at puc.nv.gov. From the top navigational bar on the home page, select Dockets and go to Docket No. 19-09011 and click "View."

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