

Health experts demand U.S. regulators stop fracked gas pipeline expansion

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Thousands of youth strikers take part in a climate march on 12 April, 2019 in London, England. (Photo: Wiktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

New York, March 8 (RHC)-- More than 500 physicians and other medical professionals have signed on to a letter urging federal regulators to prevent the expansion of a fracked gas pipeline in the Pacific Northwest. The sign-on campaign comes as the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) is expected to weigh in on TC Energy's Gas Transmission Northwest (GTN) Xpress project as soon as this

month.

The Canadian company's proposed expansion would boost the capacity of a pipeline that runs through British Columbia, Canada and the U.S. states of Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California. "FERC should deny the permit for this pipeline expansion proposal, which is both unnecessary to meet our energy needs and harmful to people in our communities."

"We are in a climate crisis, where we are already experiencing the devastating effects of rising temperatures, the direct result of burning fossil fuels, including so-called 'natural gas,' i.e., methane," the health professionals wrote, noting that methane has more than 80 times the warming power of carbon dioxide over its first 20 years.

Dr. Ann Turner of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) said that "as medical practitioners, we see the impact the climate crisis has on people each and every day. And we have a responsibility to sound the alarm. We urge FERC to prioritize the health of our most vulnerable communities over profit."

As the letter explains:

TC Energy proposes to increase the amount of gas in its existing pipelines by expanding compressor stations which provide the force which propels gas through pipelines. These compressor stations emit significant amounts of air pollution, both from the operation of the engine which powers the pump as well as from venting. Compressor stations and meter stations vent methane, volatile organic compounds like formaldehyde, particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide. All of these air pollutants have serious health impacts, including increased risks of stroke, cancer, asthma and low birth weight, and premature babies. Compressor stations also produce significant noise pollution. The air and noise pollution from these compressor stations disproportionately harms the rural, low-income, and minority communities that already experience significant health disparities, especially those that are living in proximity to the pipeline expansion project.

"In addition to the health consequences from the pipeline expansion project itself, gas in the GTN pipeline is extracted by fracking in Canada," the letter highlights. "Fracking degrades the environment including contamination of soil, water, and air by toxic chemicals. Communities exposed to these toxins experience elevated rates of birth defects, cancer, and asthma."

"The negative health impacts of methane gas, and its contribution to warming the climate and polluting the air, are unacceptable impacts that disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and people of color and low-income communities," the letter adds, arguing that the project is inconsistent with both global and regional goals to reduce planet-heating emissions.

Organizations supporting the letter include Wild Idaho Rising Tide as well as the San Francisco, Oregon, and Washington arms of PSR—which have previously joined other local groups in speaking out against the project alongside regional political figures including U.S. Democratic Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, both of Oregon.

"Idahoans dread FERC approval of the GTN Xpress expansion project, which would force greater fracked gas volumes and hazardous emissions through the aging GTN pipeline," according to Helen Yost of Wild Idaho Rising Tide.

"This expansion project would further threaten and harm the health and safety of rural communities, environments, and recreation economies for decades," she warned. "This proposed expansion does not support the best interests of concerned Northwesterners living and working near compressor stations and the pipeline route."

Dr. Mark Vossler, a board member at Washington PSR, pointed out that "states in the Northwest have made great strides in reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and creating healthier communities."

"I urge FERC to consider the human health impact of the proposed pipeline expansion and respect the leadership of local, state, and tribal governments in addressing the climate crisis," he said. "FERC should deny the permit for this pipeline expansion proposal, which is both unnecessary to meet our energy needs and harmful to people in our communities."

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