

New Mexico Gas Co. seeks pipeline reroute near Pilar

By J.R. Logan

The Taos News, 12/4/2014

A proposal to relocate a natural gas line in the Lower R'io Grande Gorge is meant to secure gas service to Northern New Mexico. But the project is raising concerns among some Pilar residents and could cause months of traffic delays on the main route between Santa Fe and Taos.

New Mexico Gas Company wants to reroute about six miles of natural gas pipeline that runs just north of Rinconada and up to Pilar. The pipeline — known as the “Taos mainline” — is the only source of natural gas for Taos, Questa, Red River and the surrounding communities.

The company says the existing line, on the west side of the river opposite the highway, sits on shaky ground that is constantly moving. The company says the uncertain ground is stressing the line and could cause outages.

Because much of the property in the area is administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the company has submitted a plan of development on the project to the agency, asking for a new easement across federal lands.

“Active landslide deposits in the Rio Grande Gorge immediately southwest of Pilar, New Mexico, are causing stress to the steel 8-inch line and could cause natural gas service to be interrupted to these communities,” reads the company’s plan of development submitted to the BLM.

According to that plan, the company’s preferred option would be to bury a new line in the highway right-of-way along State Road 68. The other option the company proposed would be to run the line up the west side of the canyon to the mesa on the west side of the gorge, then bring it back down the mesa into Pilar.

Mark Robertson, a longtime Pilar resident, attended a public meeting on the project last month and suggested the company find a way to shore up the line within the existing right of way. In comments submitted at the meeting, Robertson said that would be the best way to avoid additional environmental damage and disruptions caused by construction.

Teala Kail, a spokesperson for New Mexico Gas Company, said in an interview the existing line was built in 1964. According to Kail, only 1,000 feet of the existing line in the project area is above ground. The rest of it is buried.

Kail said the company felt replacing the pipeline in the existing right-of-way was not an option because of the shifting soils. “It’s not an adequate solution,” she said.

Kail said rerouting the line was the best way to ensure safe and reliable service to the Taos area. “At the end of the day, we have to consider a long-term solution,” Kail said.

Kail also noted that the lower gorge is a “tricky” place to work. The narrow canyon is prone to rockslides, and in many places inside the proposed project area, the highway is carved into the side of the canyon wall and perched right above the R’o Grande. The area is also technically part of the National Wild and Scenic River system, which affords special protections to public land administered by the BLM.

The plan of development says construction along State Road 68 would “require an elaborate traffic control plan,” though the company said such a plan would be developed after a route is approved.

If the pipeline in the highway right of way is OK’d, Kail said the company would have to close one lane of traffic in the gorge area to do the work.

The company’s plan says it will take 160 days to finish the entire project, but Kail said highway traffic would be affected for about two months.

Kail said the only line rupture occurred in 1986 inside the project area. A *Taos News* article from the time said the outage was caused by an ice plug that formed in the line, and crews spent days trying to remove it.

Kail said this week an engineer with the gas company dismissed the possibility of an ice plug. According to Kail and the engineer, “a frozen ice plug in a gas line is not consistent with the way natural gas operates in a pipeline.” She said the rupture and associated outage in 1986 was caused by “downhill creep and instability.”

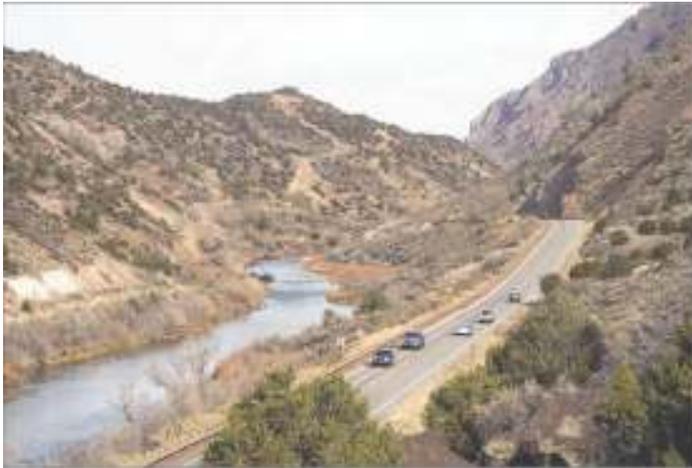
An online search by *The Taos News* yielded several scientific and academic journal articles referencing “ice blockages” and “hydrate plugs” that can stop gas from moving in a pipeline.

In its proposal to the BLM, the company also says it plans to increase the size of the relocated pipe from 8 inches to 12 inches. The company said in its plan that increase will allow it to accommodate future growth and demand in the area.

A 2012 integrated resource plan filed with regulators states that the company’s system capacity was adequate to meet current demand and anticipated growth for 10 years.

Kail noted that even if the remaining sections of pipe on either side of the project are not replaced, the larger diameter pipeline would allow the company to increase its “line pack,” or the amount of gas it can store in the line to maintain pressure and supply gas to customers. Kail also noted that the scar left by construction of the existing gas pipeline along the river and up the mesa in Pilar would not be as apparent because of reclamation requirements that exist today. “Practices in the industry have come a long way,” Kail said.

The BLM is accepting public comment on the project until Dec. 16. Comments can be emailed to: blm_nm_tafo_comments@blm.gov. Comments can also be sent by mail to BLM Taos Field Office, Attention: Brad Higdon, 226 Cruz Alta Road, Taos NM 87571.



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New Mexico Gas Company seeks approval from the BLM to relocate its existing pipeline (visible on the far side of the river) to an easement beside the highway through the Lower Rio Grande Gorge between Rinconada and Pilar. The BLM is preparing an environmental assessment on the project. If approved, the company does not expect work to begin for another 12 to 18 months.