

BLM greenlights pipeline reroute through Rio Grande Gorge

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The Bureau of Land Management has granted final approval for New Mexico Gas Company to reroute about 6 miles of Taos County's only natural gas pipeline between August and November.

The BLM decision, issued April 26, grants the company 47 acres of a permanent right of way and 30 acres of a temporary right of way.

This final approval came after the public had a chance to comment on the draft environmental assessment, which yielded 33 "unique comments," of which 13 were deemed substantive by the federal agency. The comments urged reclamation of the old pipeline route, limited interruption to traffic and planning for storm water runoff. Initial rounds of public comments in 2014 resulted in the BLM approving the final plan.

"Input from the public contributed substantially to the final decision on this project," said Sarah Schlanger, Taos field manager for the BLM, in a press release. "The public helped to identify what became the approved route, and public input also led to ruling out some of the early options that would have resulted in unacceptable consequences."

The pipeline currently runs along the west side of the Rio Grande between Rinconada and Pilar, where shifting soils and active geology have put the pipeline at risk of rupture and damage for at least the past three decades.

The gas company started the process of rerouting the pipeline in 2014.

The project will eliminate two crossings under the Rio Grande and remove pipeline infrastructure from a Native American site. After construction, the pipeline will run along the east side of State Road 68.

The \$14 million project is expected to begin in August, according to both the gas company and the BLM.

"Our objective is to limit traffic delays to no more than 15 to 30 minutes and, of course, we will strive to decrease wait times as much as possible," according to Tim Korte, the gas company's spokesperson.

The BLM decision was a necessary prerequisite for the New Mexico Department of Transportation to issue a highway utility permit.

While the right of way allows the project to move forward, site plans will be developed in tandem with a general contractor, which the company anticipates hiring in May.

