



BPU Déjà vu: Agency Approves Pinelands Pipeline for Second Time

Tom Johnson | July 23, 2015

Controversial project, which has generated solid opposition, would convert coal-fired B.L. England power plant to natural gas

In a matter of minutes, a state agency approved a proposal to build a controversial 22-mile natural-gas pipeline through the core of the Pinelands Forest.

For the second time in two years, the Board of Public Utilities endorsed the pipeline project proposed by South Jersey Gas, which would convert the B. L. England power plant from being coal-fired to using natural gas.

The project, yet to be approved by the Pinelands Commission, is opposed by virtually all of the state's conservation groups, as well as four former governors --Republicans Thomas Kean and Christine Whitman and Democrats Brendan Byrne and Jim Florio.

The five commissioners unanimously approved without debate a slightly modified version of the project originally given the nod by the BPU in April 2013. It is uncertain when the Pinelands Commission, which deadlocked on approving the project in January 2014, will consider the proposal.

Since then, Gov. Chris Christie replaced one of the commissioners who had voted against the pipeline. The project aligns with the administration's Energy Master Plan, which calls for the state to phase out the use of coal to generate electricity and replace it with less-polluting natural gas.

The changes made to the project include moving a planned interconnection station from within the Pineland Forest Management Area to outside the protected zone, a step opponents fear could lead to eventual approval of the project by the Pinelands Commission. South Jersey Gas also agreed not to connect any new customers to the portion of the pipeline located within the protected zone.

In analyzing the modified route, the BPU's pipeline safety staff determined there were no additional concerns with the changes, according to Richard Mroz, president of the regulatory agency.

"There's been a lot of focus on this," Mroz acknowledged during the board's monthly meeting in the Statehouse Annex. "This is a matter in front of us today that is limited in scope."

Not so for critics, however. They argue the pipeline is unneeded, would saddle ratepayers with millions of dollars in added costs on their utility bills, and threaten one of the largest sources of fresh drinking water on the East Coast.

“The BPU just rubber-stamped the Pinelands pipeline without acknowledging that there’s no need for it,” said Doug O’Malley, executive director of Environment New Jersey.

He and others noted that PJM Interconnection already is undertaking transmission upgrades in the region to ensure B.L. England can safely close by 2018 without “impacting the reliability of the power grid.”

“The BPU didn’t even listen to the grid operator, said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. “This decision puts the future of the Pinelands at stake and dismantles 40 years of Pinelands protections.”

Dan Lockwood, a spokesman for the utility, said it was pleased with the BPU’s decision.

“We have consistently maintained that we are not completing this project to spur any further development in the Pinelands area, and this order supports our ongoing intention,” Lockwood said. “In addition, by siting our interconnect station outside of the forest area, we are further minimizing environmental impacts associated with the project.”

The South Jersey Gas project is one of at least a dozen new pipelines or extensions that have been proposed in New Jersey since the discovery of plentiful deposits of natural gas in Pennsylvania, which have driven down energy costs for consumers and businesses.