

Groups say B.L. England pipeline will harm Pinelands

Hearing on pipeline is scheduled Friday

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BEESLEYS POINT — Local environmentalists plan to speak out Friday against a planned 22-mile natural gas pipeline from Millville to the B.L. England power plant in Beesleys Point, part of a planned \$400 million conversion from coal and oil to natural gas.

The New Jersey Pinelands Commission's Comprehensive Management Plan Policy and Implementation Committee is scheduled to discuss the proposed pipeline at 9:30 a.m. on Friday, July 26 in New Lisbon.

South Jersey Gas is proposing to build the \$90 million pipeline from its facility in Millville to Beesleys Point later this year. It requires approval from the Pinelands Commission because a part of the pipeline will pass through the Pinelands. The company and B.L. England's owner, Texas-based Rockland Capital, have gotten approvals from the state Board of Public Utilities (BPU) for the conversion but still require other approvals for the pipeline.

The pipeline will transport about 20 million dekatherms of gas from Millville to Beesleys Point. That equates to the same amount of gas that South Jersey Gas provides to 267,000 homes in a year.

Environmental and preservation groups say they oppose the pipeline's construction because it will damage the Pinelands and its native species.

Georgina Shanley of Ocean City, who helped found local environmental group CURE (Citizens United for Renewable Energy), said there are 92 protected plants in the area. Construction and maintenance of the pipeline will put "extreme pressure" on those species, she said.

She likened the potential damage from a pipeline by paraphrasing biologist E.O. Wilson about the rainforest: "Destroying forests for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal," she said.

Jeff Tittel, president of the New Jersey Sierra Club, said the pipeline would cross at least two populations of threatened or endangered plants. The proposed route through the Pinelands violates the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP), he said.

"The CMP permits such public service infrastructure in the Forest Area only when it is intended to primarily serve the needs of the Pinelands," he said. "There is no exception for pipes run along or under roads."

If the rules can "simply be ignored whenever a utility company wants to do something... then the credibility and permanence of the CMP is damaged," Tittel said in a letter.

The New Jersey Sierra Club, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, and Waterwatch International have come out against the pipeline. Some of the groups have also voiced concerns over the source of the natural gas, which is acquired through a controversial process known as hydraulic fracturing or "fracking." In fracking, a mix of water and chemicals is used to fracture underground rock and release natural gas. Environmentalists say the mix can pollute ground water.

"The pipeline would promote water pollution from fracking and cooling towers, as well as air pollution from power plants, while creating irreversible harm to wetlands and streams, and damaging important open spaces," said Tittel.

The Sierra Club is also concerned that the 24-inch gas main could be used to export natural gas, he said.

According to a map submitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the proposed pipeline would travel from Millville down Route 49, passing through Maurice River Township, Estell Manor and Upper Township. In Upper Township, the pipeline would turn south from Route 49 onto Cedar Avenue, before the intersection with Route 50. It would then turn east onto Mill Road and Reading Avenue before turning south again onto Mount Pleasant-Tuckahoe Road. It would then turn onto Route 50 and travel through Tuckahoe and Petersburg on Route 631 before turning north and using the power line right-of-way parallel to the train tracks to the B.L. England plant in Beesleys Point.

Along the way the pipeline will pass 49 feet beneath the bottom of Mill Creek and 41 feet beneath Cedar Swamp Creek in Upper Town-

ship. The paths under the creeks will be drilled horizontally and no discharge will be released into the water, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Army Corps said no threatened or endangered species will be affected at the creek crossings.

According to South Jersey Gas, approximately 20 miles of the 22-mile pipeline are within existing, cleared public right-of-way. Around two miles are across private property within Atlantic City Electric's existing power line corridor.

Within the Pinelands, the pipeline will run under and adjacent to already paved roadways, like Route 49, and will not cut into the Pinelands, according to the company's website. It hired an independent third party consulting firm that spent more than a year performing studies to ensure there are no impacts to nearby threatened and endangered species, a press release said.

The pipeline will have automatic and remotely controlled valves that will be routinely inspected, according to the company. South Jersey Gas will inspect the pipeline every month for damages or leaks.

South Jersey Gas has franchise rights to deliver natural gas to municipalities within the seven southern counties of New Jersey and cannot legally export it. The pipeline route is not near any harbors that would be sufficient to facilitate any form of exporting, according to the company.

In a statement, Rockland Capital partner Jim Maiz said the new plant will provide a clean and efficient long-term solution for New Jersey's energy needs. He said that following the completion of the natural gas conversion in 2016, the 615 MW B.L. England facility "will have advanced pollution controls and be one of the cleanest and most efficient combined-cycle gas plants in the country."

At almost 50 years old, the B.L. England facility is one of New Jersey's oldest power plants. The two coal-fired units at the B.L. England plant are the last coal-fired units in the state without new pollution control equipment.

Rockland Capital has owned the plant since 2007. The conversion to natural gas is part of an agreement that resolves alleged violations of the federal Clean Air Act that occurred when the plant was under the ownership of Atlantic Electric, Conectiv and Pepco Holdings Co.

The previous owners did not make pollution-control upgrades as required by the Clean Air Act when they made significant upgrades to operational features of the plant.

The plant's conversion will shut down one coal-burning unit and repower a second coal-burning unit to a combined-cycle natural gas turbine. It will also refuel a third oil-burning unit with natural gas.

The conversion will nearly eliminate emissions of smog-causing nitrogen oxides as well as sulfur dioxide, which causes acid rain and haze, according to a 2012 press release from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). Hourly nitrogen oxide emissions will be reduced by nearly 98 percent, or 2,800 tons per year. Hourly sulfur dioxide emissions will be reduced by 99.9 percent, or 2,800 tons per year.

But opponents say the natural gas conversion means the plant will run constantly. Currently it is only used as a "peaker" plant.

Upper Township Committee has backed the move to natural gas and the pipeline. The township receives more than \$6 million a year in Energy Receipts Tax for hosting the plant. With the conversion, the plant will operate for more than 20 years, meaning that money will be available until then, according to officials.

In 1978 and 1979 Congress and New Jersey passed legislation to protect the Pinelands and its unique natural and cultural resources.

The Pinelands National Reserve is the first National Reserve in the nation. It encompasses approximately 1.1 million acres covering portions of seven counties and all or parts of 56 municipalities.

This region occupies 22 percent of New Jersey's land area. It is the largest body of open space on the Mid-Atlantic seaboard between Richmond and Boston and is underlain by aquifers containing 17 trillion gallons of water, according to the Pinelands Commission.