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Compressor stations reason for concern?

By RICHIE DAVIS

Recorder Staff

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DEERFIELD — When Tom and Ben Clark of Clarkdale Fruit Farm and learned a month or so ago that Kinder Morgan was changing its preferred route for its proposed Tennessee Gas Pipeline project south from a path that would have cut across their peach orchard, they were relieved, at least on a personal level.

Then came the news that a compression station to re-pressurize the natural gas that would be pumped from Wright, N.Y., to Dracut, north of Lowell — a station that earlier maps seemed to show as being in Conway — might instead be sited within a mile of the farmhouse where Ben lives with his wife and young child.

The most recent map shows a four-mile stretch of land in Deerfield where the compressor station could be sited, although a separate metering station, which would typically be located close to the compressor station, appears to be several hundred feet away, along the earlier proposed path.

“It was a sigh of relief when we saw they’d altered (the route),” said the younger Clark, quickly adding that he and his father still oppose the pipeline project, that would carry up to 2.2 billion cubic feet of fracked natural gas a day across nine Franklin County towns.

Yet the Houston-based pipeline company has never formally informed Deerfield officials that current plans call for siting the compressor station in town, and the Board of Selectmen, which also serves as the Board of Health, has expressed outrage that the company has used photos of a 2,000-horsepower compressor station in Southwick as an illustration of what such a facility would look like, even though the facility here would be 60 times larger, at 120,000 horsepower.

A total of 20 acres is needed for construction of the station.

“This is just dramatically different. They were so disingenuous,” said Carolyn Shores Ness, who chairs the selectmen’s and health boards, which she says invited company representatives to meet with them but were rebuffed. “This is just info we’ve gleaned from their filing, and they still haven’t told us whether it’s going to be on Hawks Road or Woolman Hill.”

Instead, the company’s most recent filing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission shows a four mile area — near the Conway line at the Deerfield River, west of Hawks Road, eastward to Trap Rock Ledge on Woolman Hill, where a 10-acre compressor station with four Titan 250 turbines would be placed.

The eight planned compressor stations for the project, according to TGP’s filing, help transport the gas by compressing it, increasing pressure and providing the energy to move it through the system. They are placed along the route at varying intervals based on the pipeline diameter — expected to be 36 inches — the volume of gas to be moved and the terrain.

Plenty of concerns

Ben Clark, who moved back to the family farm in 2008 as a fourth-generation apple grower on the land, said his main concerns are quality of life, including noise, light and air pollution, not only from exhaust but also from routine off-gassing to adjust pressure and potential leaks, with a list of chemicals that have been found from monitoring compressor stations elsewhere — including benzene, carbon disulfide, toluene and radon.

“We’re being good stewards of the land, trying to raise not just food, but our families in a healthy environment without worrying (about) who knows what any of us are breathing?”

Both men, who have been members of the Deerfield Fire Department, say they also have real concerns about public safety, especially given problems of access to wooded areas if a site near Hawks Road is selected.

“Any type of fire along a pipeline, there’s nothing you can do until they shut the gas down,” Ben Clark says. “A rural fire department hasn’t any means of putting down a gas fire of that size. You’d have all of those miles of gas to burn off, and there could be a major wildfire on inaccessible land, where there are only a few ways in. You’d be talking about helicopter drops.”

Father and son recalled being called in to fight a gas fire along the railroad tracks along the river in Shelburne when multiple departments responded.

Because of terrain, lot sizes and the flood plain near low lying areas along the four-mile area designated for a compressor station, the Clarks said there are a limited number of places where they could imagine one being built, including one within a mile from their farm and another near Trew Stone in East Deerfield.

The pipeline company has emphasized in the past that plans for the pipeline route are subject to change.

The unmanned stations, which operate around the clock, are typically located on sites that average about 25 to 30 acres, Kinder Morgan spokesman Richard Wheatley has previously said.

Wheatley said more compressor stations with a lesser amount of horsepower at each is an option, but that “fewer compressor stations means that fewer landowners are impacted, there is less potential environmental and archaeological disturbance, and fewer stations also provide better economies of scale.”

Station details

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, most of the stations consist of several compressors, scrubbers, filters and cooling facilities, emergency shutdown systems and a computerized flow control and dispatch system that is monitored by an off-site supervisory control system that manages and coordinates several related stations.

After compression, the compressed natural gas goes to a cooling unit, and then is returned to the transmission line.

Most compressor stations are fueled by some of the natural gas flowing through the station, and compressor stations are equipped with emergency shutdown systems that can detect an unanticipated pressure drop, gas leak or other abnormal conditions, according to EIA.

Deerfield Fire Department’s Prudential Committee, in a report to Deerfield selectmen, wrote, “Departments that have dealt with pipeline fires report an incineration zone of a tenth of a mile radius. Flammable structures or fuel within that radius can be anticipated to expand the zone. In 2010, a faulty weld on a 30-inch gas pipeline in suburban San Francisco resulted in the death of eight people and the destruction of 20 homes. Although we are a rural community the pipeline will put some residents within an incineration zone. The diameter of the proposed pipeline is to be 36 inches to 42 inches.”

“We’re a small department, Committee Chair Patrick O’Brian told The Recorder, “Kinder Morgan has been so closed mouthed about it, as we’re going on is other people’s experiences ... You’ll have inevitable leaks. I’m concerned.”

“To think that our Deerfield Fire Department would be responsible for responding to an incident like this is ridiculous,” Ness said. “We have no capacity. Who’s going to benefit from this? It’s not us. They’re just using our town and our resources, and that’s not right. I see no benefit to the town of Deerfield as a community.”

Another of the key concerns of pipeline opponents is about the noise of compressor stations, and groups have posted online video clips of operations that sound like a continuous roar, described as similar to locomotives running constantly, with occasional “jet engine” sounds when venting occurs.

That hasn’t been the case at the Sandisfield compression station, located just off Route 57, according to Timothy Greene, who lives across the road.

Although he and neighbors raised concerns when TGP neighbor put the station in a couple of years ago, he said, “It’s not a huge anything,” and is set back behind shrubbery about 600 feet back from road. “I don’t even know when it’s running.”

Then again, that station is only 2,000 horsepower.

Pipeline opponents also point to Vibro-Acoustic Noise as a concern, from severe or long-term exposure to low-frequency noise that can cause the body to secrete adrenaline, in turn constricting blood vessels.

In Hawley, Pa., a 9,600-horsepower TGP compressor station was barely noticeable to Andrew Jones, who bought a weekend and future retirement home there in 2009. But when the company decided to expand the station to 25,900 horsepower, residents of the area raised concerns about smells, safety and noise.

When the station was built a year ago, Jones — who lives within a mile of the facility, behind a fire station, recalls, “Wow, it was incredible! A pressure-hissing noise like you wouldn’t believe ... like pressure engines and a high-pitched noise. I didn’t know who to turn to.”

But Jones, who works in Manhattan for the Federal Reserve Bank and had bought the home for quiet getaways, said he called TGP and was amazed: he got a return call 15 minutes later, telling him that the company was sorry, but they didn’t know how bad the noise would be. They said they had plans to fix the problem in the coming months.

True to their word, the company hired outside engineers and installed insulation by June.

“It was quiet a little bit, and I still heard it,” Jones said. He raised concerns that the problem would worsen after leaves fell.

After testing noise levels, the company fixed the problem further with additional insulation.

“They’ve been great,” said Jones, who said that there are still some noises occasionally and still some gas odors.

And still, given the potential for gas explosions and fires, all is not entirely calm.

“We are concerned about safety,” he said. “We don’t want anything blowing up.”

On the Web: www.kindermorgan.com/business/gas_pipelines/east/neenergydirect/

www.naturalgaswatch.org

You can reach Richie Davis at rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 269

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