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Guest columnists

Pipeline safety: Don't sacrifice the good for the status quo

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We are the parents who lost children when the Olympic pipeline exploded on June 10, 1999. As we struggled with our own loss, we also have struggled to give meaning to that loss by trying to make pipelines safer in this country. To our sadness and despair, before we were able to see meaningful pipeline reform occur, tragedy struck again with a pipeline explosion that killed 12 family members in New Mexico.

The Washington state delegation to Congress, led by Reps. Jay Inslee and Jack Metcalf, and Sens. Slade Gorton and Patty Murray, have done a wonderful job of pushing pipeline safety into the consciousness of Washington, D.C. Without their efforts, there would not now be a debate regarding whether to pass the weak bill that the Senate approved, or to wait for a real, meaningful bill from the House. For their efforts, we thank them.

In her recent guest commentary, Sen. Murray said that our push for a meaningful pipeline safety bill from the House means that we are willing "to sacrifice the good for the perfect." We wish our choice was between good and perfect but, unfortunately, the bill that passed the Senate was so watered down by those who pay homage to the powerful oil and gas lobbyists, that in reality it would change very little.

The Senate pipeline bill leaves almost all decisions on critical matters, such as pipeline testing, pipeline leak detection, employee training, public involvement and fines, up to the discretion of the federal Office of Pipeline Safety (OPS). According to the General Accounting Office, OPS has failed to implement 22 legislative mandates Congress has passed since 1988. If you tell an agency to do something 22 times and they ignore you, by what logic do you think they will pay attention the 23rd time?

After a terrible pipeline explosion killed a mother and her daughter in Mounds View, Minn., in 1986, the industry and the OPS said they would develop new standards to ensure safety. They did not. After a huge pipeline explosion destroyed part of Edison, N.J., in 1994, the industry and OPS said they would develop new standards to ensure safety. They did not!

After three dead here in Bellingham, and now 12 more dead in New Mexico, guess what the industry and OPS are saying. Why should we trust them this time? Ask yourself why pipeline-safety organizations across the country are opposed to the Senate pipeline bill, while the pipeline industry is now trying to push for its passage.

For a pipeline bill to have real meaning, it has to take the discretion away from the industry-controlled Office of Pipeline Safety. It has to spell out clearly how often pipelines need to be tested, and how that testing is to be accomplished. It has to set strict penalties for companies

that do not pay enough attention to their pipelines. It has to include strong local oversight of pipeline safety so those who have the most to lose if something goes wrong have a say in making sure that pipelines are safe. And it needs to ensure that the public can review a wide range of information regarding the pipelines that run through their communities.

These requirements all make common sense, practical sense, and represent what a good pipeline safety bill would do. The Senate bill does not accomplish any of these, and we call on the members of the House to do what it takes to pass a stronger bill that secures for the public true safety improvements.

Those who are advocating our acceptance of the inadequate Senate bill urge us not to "sacrifice the good for the perfect." But the reality is that the Senate bill is a long way from "good" and will result in business as usual in an industry that enjoyed a net profit of 40 percent in 1999, while communities across the nation will continue to experience horrific failures of aging pipelines.

How many more sons and daughters will be lost before meaningful pipeline-safety reform is passed? We do not want to wait until next year, but we will if we must.

Fortunately, good pipeline-safety bills have already been drafted and introduced in the House. The House needs to pass one promptly, and the Senate needs to follow the House's lead and not sacrifice the good for the status quo.

The authors are parents of the three young people killed in the Bellingham pipeline disaster.