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PHMSA Announces Proposed Updates to Gas Distribution Pipeline Regulations that will Increase Safety and Protect Public

The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking comes in response to the 2018 tragedy in Merrimack Valley, MA that claimed the life of 18-year-old Leonel Rondon, hospitalized more than 20, damaged 130 buildings and forced the evacuation of over 50,000 residents.

BELLINGHAM, Washington [Aug. 25, 2023] – The federal pipeline safety regulator, U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) announced a [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\)](#) aimed at bolstering safety regulations for the nation’s gas distribution pipelines. The goal of the proposed rule is to increase pipeline safety and mitigate the risk of over-pressurization events on the 2.3 million miles of gas distribution pipelines in operation around the country.

[Gas distribution pipelines](#) are the smaller lines that move gas within communities and to our individual homes and businesses. Distribution pipelines consist of a system of mains and service lines and operate at a relatively low pressure. An over-pressurization event on Columbia Gas of Massachusetts’s (CMA) gas distribution was responsible for the senseless tragedy in 2018.

In its NPRM, PHMSA lists multiple new measures that gas distribution pipeline operators would have to adhere to in order to improve safety on their systems. Some of these measures include improving operation manuals, emergency response plans and integrity management plans.

PHMSA’s new rule reflects both Congressionally-mandated revisions and recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) after their investigation of the 2018 Merrimack Valley tragedy.

NTSB found the root cause to be CMA’s failure to adequately devise, implement and oversee a cast iron main replacement project on their gas distribution system. This failure led to a

catastrophic over-pressurization event, which caused several explosions in the towns of Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover, MA on Sept. 13, 2018. As a result of CMA's inability to protect the public, a federal judge mandated the operator pay \$53 million in criminal penalties and then ordered the entity to sell itself.

"This rule, if finalized, will help prevent future over-pressurization events like the one that killed Leonel Rondon and caused so much devastation in the 2018 Merrimack Valley tragedy," Pipeline Safety Trust Executive Director Bill Caram said. "We'd like to extend a big thank you to Senators Markey and Cantwell for their leadership in negotiating this mandate to PHMSA."

The NPRM states pipeline safety on gas distribution systems can be improved if operators upgrade their construction procedures meant to reduce the risk of over-pressurization events and update their Distribution Integrity Management Programs to ensure they are properly equipped and prepared for such events. In addition, if finalized, the rule would require new regulator stations be built with secondary pressure relief valves and remote gas monitoring, which would mitigate serious damage caused by potential future incidents and help gas distribution systems avoid devastating over-pressurization events in general.

An important area addressed by PHMSA in the NPRM is operators' responsibility in coordinating with not only emergency responders, but the public. This rule would require operators update their existing emergency response plans, which in many cases, including Merrimack, were found wholly inadequate. PHMSA's new proposed requirements direct operators to ensure both local emergency responders, affected members of the public and operator's customers are aware of what actions they should take to stay safe in the event of a disaster.

"After several of these devastating over-pressurization events, Merrimack Valley the most recent, we welcome these common-sense, practical steps to ensure this never happens again," Caram said.

PHMSA has sent the [full NPRM](#) to the federal register. The agency says it will release an opportunity to provide public comment and publication date when they become available in the future.

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About Pipeline Safety Trust: The Pipeline Safety Trust is a nonprofit public watchdog promoting pipeline safety through education and advocacy by increasing access to information, and by building partnerships with residents, safety advocates, government, and industry, that result in safer communities and a healthier environment.