

Natural Gas Pipeline Plan Creates Rift in Massachusetts

By [TOM ZELLER Jr.](#)

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Walter Jaworski, who opposes a proposed pipeline that would slice through his Massachusetts ranch, with the letter he sent to Kinder Morgan revoking its permission to survey his property.

Credit Tom Zeller Jr.

NORTHFIELD, Mass. — Standing on a dirt road outside his aging barn, Walter Jaworski, a former veterinarian turned cattle rancher in this rural part of north-central Massachusetts, points south across his 200 acres of forest and pasture to a nearby tree line. If things don't go his way, he says, that's about where a new natural gas pipeline will slice through his land on a [180-mile journey](#) from central New York to a transmission hub north of Boston.

The project, proposed by the pipeline giant Kinder Morgan at a cost of \$2 billion to \$3 billion “or more,” according to the company, is only in the earliest stages of consideration. But debate over its placement — and even its overall need — is in full swing, with anti-pipeline yard signs and heated public meetings.

Mr. Jaworski is just one of thousands of public and private property owners here who find themselves wedged between the mammoth shale gas supply being unleashed in states to the west, like Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, and the increasingly insatiable market for the fuel in New England.



A protest sign sits in the path of the proposed pipeline.

Credit Tom Zeller Jr.

Added to the region's existing market for natural gas as a heating fuel, new demand for gas by electricity generators has created wintertime shortfalls and price spikes beyond previous experience — a situation that officials are eager to address. New England's governors have gone so far as to [propose a tariff on electricity users](#) to cover the cost of building new pipeline capacity.

But Mr. Jaworski, along with a growing number of critics of pipeline expansion in general, remains unmoved, arguing that there are less costly and intrusive ways to address the region's energy needs.

“They’re saying that New England is in need of gas, but I understand that that’s not necessarily true,” Mr. Jaworski said. “We’d probably have enough if we did a little conservation.”

There is little question that demand for natural gas here is rising fast. Tougher environmental regulations and low natural gas prices have combined to nudge many electricity generators to retire aging coal- and oil-fired plants in favor of ones burning cleaner — and cheap — natural gas, which now accounts for approximately half of the region’s electricity mix, up from less than 15 percent in 2000, according to data from New England’s grid operators.

But all of that gas moves through a network of transmission pipes largely built to serve the region’s heating needs. When surges in winter demand drive prices to record highs, electricity generators must resort to expensive backup fuel sources like stored oil.

A [report](#) by the engineering consultancy Black & Veatch, commissioned last year by the New England States Committee on Electricity, or Nescoc — a cooperative linking the interests of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont — concluded that without change, the region’s natural gas infrastructure would be under severe stress in coming years.

Birud Jhaveri, a deputy commissioner with the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources, called it a “crisis like no other.”

A separate, [industry-backed study](#), presented to Nescoc last winter, concluded that in order to bring New England’s energy prices in line with neighboring regions’, planners should contemplate an additional two billion cubic feet per day of pipeline capacity — an increase of about 50 percent over current pipeline capacity into the region, according to federal data.

It was around the same time that Kinder Morgan began seeking permission from property owners to conduct surveys in an effort to fine-tune the path of its proposed pipeline.

It has not been warmly welcomed in many cases.

At a [meeting](#) with Kinder Morgan representatives in the town of Montague this spring, Jonathan Mark Haber, a resident of nearby Warwick, asked why the company didn’t seek to build along existing pipeline corridors, rather than digging trenches through large tracts of greenfield — including his own property.

“To choose this section of Massachusetts for a pipeline — can you guarantee it will never leak?” Mr. Haber asked. “Can you guarantee that there won’t be a tree falling on it, or another accident? This is, like, more precious to me than the gas you’re providing.”

Mr. Haber said he refused the company’s survey request.

Richard Wheatley, a company spokesman, said via email that a “significant portion” of the project, which is an extension of its Tennessee Gas Pipeline system, could be buried alongside existing pipeline or electricity transmission corridors. But he also said that in many instances, the pathways that opponents would prefer — like paralleling Interstate 90, which crosses the length of the state — did not make sense.



Residents of eight towns came together to discuss ways to prevent a proposed natural gas pipeline from crossing their communities.

Credit Cheryl Senter for The New York Times

“Routing along a highway or interstate corridor can present a higher degree of land disturbance than other, more remote areas, especially if there is a high population density,” Mr. Wheatley said.

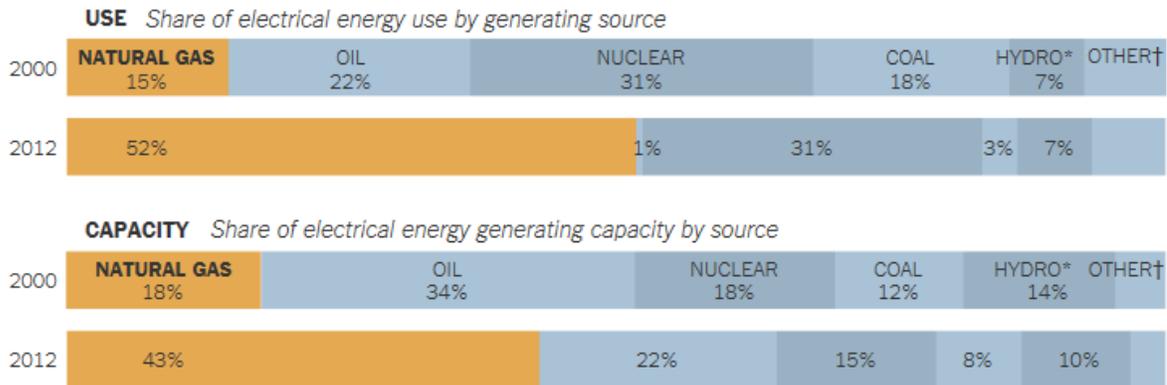
The company plans an initial permit filing this fall with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the ultimate arbiter of interstate pipeline projects. If approvals proceed as planned, Mr. Wheatley said, the pipeline could be delivering 600 million to 2.2 billion cubic feet per day of additional natural gas capacity to the region by late 2018.

That would be enough to ease the capacity problem, but Shanna Cleveland, a lawyer at the Conservation Law Foundation, an environmental nonprofit in New England, argued that the same thing could be accomplished by relying on backup stores of liquefied natural gas and improving efficiency so that less gas was needed over all. She also said that other, smaller pipeline expansion projects [were already planned](#), and that adjusting the region’s wholesale market, so that unused gas capacity could be bought and sold in real time, would adequately address shortfalls.

Ms. Cleveland also worried that longer-term downsides, including the potential for natural gas prices to rise across the board, were being overlooked — as were the [effects of natural gas on global warming](#).

Shifting Energy Sources

Half of New England's electricity is now generated by burning natural gas, prompting officials to seek new ways to import the fuel.



*Includes pumped-storage hydroelectric generation. †Other renewables, including wind

Source: ISO New England

“Building big pipelines not only locks us into a system we need to outgrow,” she said, “but also undermines efforts to address the climate crisis.”

Not all landowners oppose the pipeline. William Gaida, a retired railroad foreman, brokered a deal with the state's wildlife division to protect his 80 acres in Orange, Mass., from development in 2002. But after a Kinder Morgan agent visited him at his home last winter, he granted the company permission to survey. Although Mr. Gaida now says he wished he had done more research before signing the Kinder Morgan form, he doesn't object to the project.

“My own opinion is that if they do it right it's probably O.K.,” he said. “Some people — I don't know where they think they're going to get their electricity from, because they're opposed to everything.”

Still, a crucial question in the brewing showdown will be whether Kinder Morgan can navigate a dense patchwork of public and private lands bearing conservation restrictions. To install a pipeline like this, a company typically needs to clear 50 feet of right of way on both sides of a trench, normally three feet in depth, where the pipe will be laid. Once the pipe is buried, the company retains a 25-foot easement on each side, and property owners face a [number of restrictions on land use](#) over the pipeline thereafter.

A provision in Massachusetts law sets numerous hurdles for those seeking to override conservation restrictions, although federal approval could supersede these.

Recognizing that federal authorities will ultimately decide whether the pipeline is in the larger public interest, Leigh Youngblood, executive director of the [Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust](#) in Athol, Mass., encourages local landowners to dig in their heels.

“Ultimately, eminent domain will supersede all the protections,” Ms. Youngblood said. “But the process can be made much more difficult — and maybe too difficult — by raising objections at every possible place.”

Mr. Wheatley of Kinder Morgan said that only about half of the 1,650 potentially affected property owners in Massachusetts had granted survey permission. The rest either refused or have not responded to company queries.

If push comes to shove, the company can obtain permission from state regulators, although Mr. Wheatley said that process had not started.

Mr. Jaworski, who initially agreed to a survey, but then changed his mind, says he hopes it never gets that far. Like many residents in the region, he opposes hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, which is how much of the natural gas that would flow through the new pipeline is obtained.

“I’d rather have a wind farm up here than a natural gas pipeline,” he said. “I know the turbines bother some people, but they don’t really bother me.”