Maryland's Dangerous Push for Fossil Fuel Infrastructure

In May 2017, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan signed a statewide ban on hydraulic fracturing (fracking) into law. The popular, bipartisan legislation made Maryland the third state to ban fracking.[1] This was a milestone in the movement to fight fossil fuels nationwide, but there is still work to be done. Despite the fracking ban, Governor Hogan is supporting new fracked gas infrastructure projects that would encourage more fracking in other states and lock in climate pollution for decades to come.

Fossil Fuel Infrastructure Locks In Climate Chaos

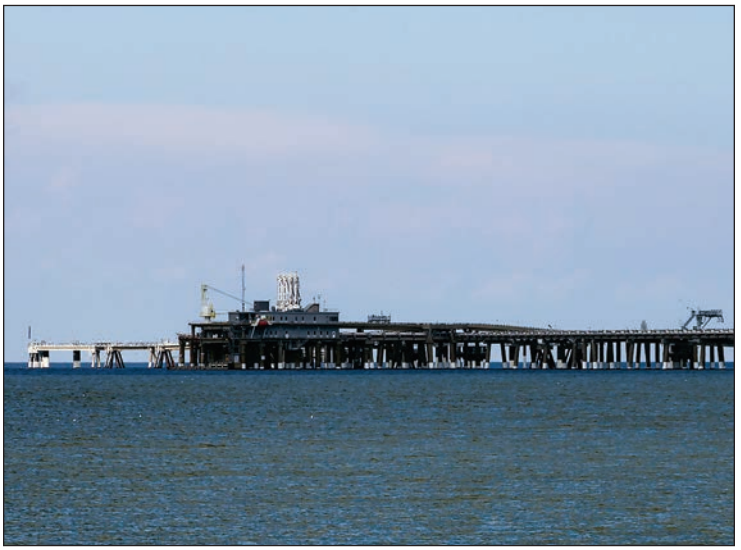
The shale gas infrastructure boom has amplified emissions of the powerful greenhouse gas methane, the primary ingredient in natural gas. The construction of fracked gas infrastructure cements Maryland into a fossil fuel future, and each new gas pipeline, compressor station and power plant creates incentives for more fracking and more gas infrastructure.

Widespread methane leaks from the oil and gas industry, including drilling rigs and pipelines, are the leading human-caused source of methane pollution in the country.[2] Methane is an extremely potent greenhouse gas, and the climate footprint of natural gas is actually worse than coal and oil because methane traps more heat in the atmosphere.[3]

Despite the alarming climate impacts from fracked gas methane leaks, Maryland is set to entrench decades more dirty fossil fuels infrastructure, undermining the progress made with Maryland's fracking ban.

Maryland's New and Proposed Gas Infrastructure

Maryland's gas infrastructure, including the Cove Point liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal, compressor stations, an existing gas storage facility, new and expanded gas pipelines and a gas-fired power plant, would increase the climate-destroying emissions from widespread methane leaks.[4] These infrastructure projects will remain part of the energy landscape for decades — some U.S. pipelines were built more than 70 years ago, and gas-fired power plants can operate for more than 50 years.[5] Building these projects prevents investments in real, renewable energy and locks in decades of climate chaos, threatening public health and the environment.



Cove Point LNG facility, Maryland

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Cove Point LNG facility: Cove Point was built in the 1970s along the Chesapeake Bay to import gas.[6] Although it mothballed in 1981, it reopened in 2003. When the fracking boom made imports obsolete, Cove Point was retrofitted to export natural gas.[7] Despite local opposition and the inherent explosion dangers associated with the volatile LNG, Cove Point's export facility went into operation in April 2018.[8]

Cove Point threatens more than 830 people living just over a mile from the facility with the risk of accidents from explosive fuels and chemicals.[9] In 2014 a pipeline explosion at a Washington state LNG terminal sent shrapnel flying into a 14.6 million gallon storage tank, causing it to leak.[10] The accident injured five workers, forced the evacuation of a thousand residents within a two-mile radius and caused $72 million in property damage.[11]

Maryland compressor stations: Compressor stations pressurize natural gas to transport it through pipelines.[12] In 2011 Dominion Transmission proposed a new compressor station in Frederick County, provoking community opposition.[13] Despite the outcry, Dominion constructed it in 2014, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) delivered another blow to the community two years later by allowing Dominion to expand the facility.[14]

In Charles County, locals are trying to stop Dominion Energy from building a new compressor station to deliver gas to Cove Point and to the new Mattawoman Energy Power Plant being built in the predominately African-American community of Brandywine.[15] In January 2018 FERC granted Dominion permission to begin construction, despite concerns and outrage from locals and community groups.[16]

These facilities emit harmful air pollutants, which can travel up to 10 miles before settling to the ground and can damage respiratory, reproductive and neurological systems and more.[17] They also expose residents to noise pollution.[18]

Accident Storage Field: The town of Accident in Garrett County is home to the state's only gas storage field, a depleted natural gas reservoir used since 1966 for storage.[19] These facilities store gas underground and connect with gathering systems and transmission pipelines.[20] Accidents can happen at gas storage hubs. In 2016 the Aliso Canyon storage facility in California leaked large quantities of methane for months, causing evacuations and serious health problems for nearby residents.[21]

Delmarva Peninsula Pipeline: In 2017 a private equity company that has never built a pipeline proposed the 190-mile Delmarva Peninsula Pipeline.[22] It is planned to start in Rising Sun, Maryland and run through large portions of agricultural land, crossing wetlands and water bodies that feed into the Chesapeake Bay until reaching Accomack County, Virginia where it will fuel poultry processing plants.[23] The pipeline could also fuel another company's proposed gas-fired power plant in Denton, Maryland (see below).[24] Permitting had not yet begun, but a spokesperson from the Maryland Department of the Environment anticipated a lengthy process.[25]

TransCanada Pipeline under the Potomac River: In March 2018 Maryland environmental regulators approved of a 3.4-mile gas pipeline, called the Eastern Panhandle Expansion Project, to run under the C&O Canal and Potomac River in Western Maryland, despite the Potomac being a drinking water source for 6 million people.[26] The pipeline is designed to deliver Pennsylvania fracked gas to West Virginia.[27] FERC has not yet approved the project, and other agencies, like the National Park Service, will need to issue approvals.[28]

Expansion of Market Hub Pipeline: The Eastern Shore Natural Gas Company has proposed the Market Hub Services & Pipeline Expansion project to substantially increase the amount of fracked gas being piped into the Eastern Shore and surrounding region. The proposal includes upgrades to an existing pipeline system and its interconnections with three major transmission lines in Pennsylvania; it also proposes a multi-year expansion to existing pipelines to increase natural gas availability in the Delmarva Peninsula. The capacity additions would be phased in between 2020 and 2022 to deliver gas to Southeastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia and Maryland.[29]

Pipeline construction is disruptive and dangerous. Building new and expanding existing pipelines in Maryland would threaten human health, wildlife habitats and the environment by compromising soil quality, impacting vegetation, contaminating surface waters and aquifers, and releasing air pollutants.[30]

Public safety and environmental threats remain even after construction is completed. Between 2002 and April 2018 there were over 10,000 pipeline leaks, spills, ruptures and explosions in the United States, resulting in over 200 fatalities, at least 860 injuries and nearly $793 million in property damage.[31] Moreover, newer pipelines built since 2010 are five times more likely to have problems than those built from 1980 through 2009, possibly because the rush to complete pipelines during the fracking boom encouraged corner-cutting during construction.[32] In 2018 a recently constructed gas pipeline exploded in a fiery blaze in Marshall County, West Virginia.[33]

Denton gas-fired power plant: In October 2017 Denton Town Commissioners committed to holding industrial-zoned land (but surrounded by farmland) for the eventual construction of a 600 megawatt natural gas-fired power plant.[34] Eastern Shore Energy, LLC — a subsidiary of North Carolina-based Spectrum Energy Inc. — would develop and construct the $700 million facility.[35] The power plant is still in the preliminary stages of development. In January 2018 the company began hosting public information sessions.[36]

Gas-fired power plants, like pipelines, bring a host of environmental and public health impacts. Denton's proposed plant would increase climate-destroying emissions — from the facility itself and widespread methane leaks from connecting infrastructure.[37] Methane emissions from gas power plants alone may be considerably higher than initially projected. A 2017 study found that gas-fired power plants released over 20 times more methane than the facilities had estimated.[38]

These power plant air emissions also pose significant health risks to nearby communities. Gas-fired plants are major emitters of nitrogen oxides, contribute to ground-level ozone and smog, and threaten the environment and human health.[39] Prolonged exposure to smog has been connected to premature deaths in adults and to low birthweight in babies.[40] Natural gas-fired power plants can also release radon,[41] a naturally occurring radioactive material that is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States,after smoking.[42] Radon radiation exposure can damage DNA, which can result in cancer-causing mutations.[43]

Conclusion

Promoting and approving of fracked gas infrastructure like the Delmarva Pipeline, Market Hub Pipeline expansion and the Denton power plant creates an enduring profit incentive for more fracking across the country (if not in Maryland). These fossil-fueled power plants and methane leaks from fracked gas infrastructure create a climate crisis legacy for decades. The billions of dollars being spent on this fossil fuel infrastructure prevents Maryland from moving into a sustainable energy future.

Governor Hogan must halt the expansion and approval of these gas infrastructure projects that benefit the fossil fuel industries. Instead, Maryland must invest in clean, renewable energy to rapidly shed dependency on the climate-destroying shale gas industry.

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