

Replacing coal with fracked gas is not a solution: Comment on Duke Energy's proposed gas plant in Asheville

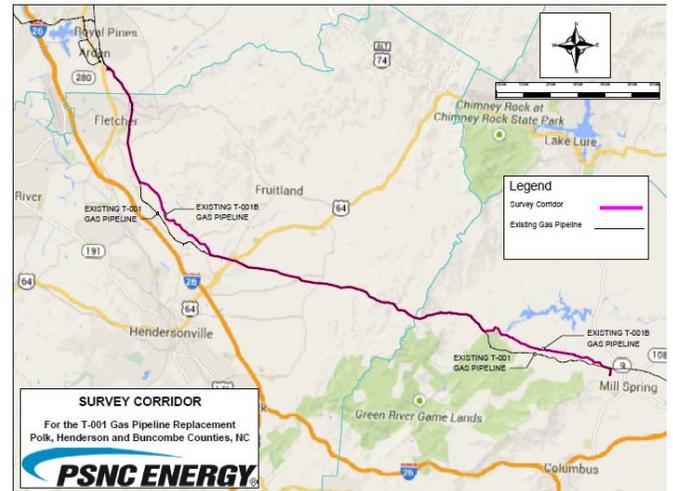
Duke's proposal to the NC Utilities Commission:

- Duke proposes two 280-megawatt combined-cycle natural gas units and an optional 186-megawatt natural gas combustion turbine, to be added by 2023 if the region doesn't reduce its electricity demands.
- Although Duke has publicized plans for a 15-megawatt solar installation and utility-scale battery, their actual application does not seek permission to install either one
- Duke is making plans under the assumption that its energy efficiency efforts in partnership with local governments will FAIL: the company seeks approval for the 186-MW peaking unit and makes no tangible commitments to pursue energy efficiency as a path to substantially reduce regional energy demand.
- The public only had 11 days to review Duke's application before the public hearing Jan. 26, and a fast-tracked process to rubber-stamp this facility, created by the NC General Assembly and carried out by the NC Utilities Commission, means concerned residents have few opportunities to weigh in on this major decision.
- Despite what Duke claims, western NC's energy needs could be met without the new natural gas units, through a combination of solar, nearby hydro plants and other sites. Duke plans to build this plant, with the associated impacts on our region (see below), in part to provide power out of state!

The health, safety, & climate risks of gas extraction and transport:

The plant will contribute to demand for domestic fracked gas, causing continued harm to water, air, and land for the communities where shale gas production is taking place.

- Gas will be supplied through an upgraded PSNC Energy pipeline running through Buncombe, Henderson and Polk Counties¹ and connecting to the Transco interstate pipeline system, which runs from the Gulf Coast to New York.
- An increasing number of scientific studies demonstrate that fracking has harmed groundwater, surface water, air quality, local infrastructure, and public health².



Communities have limited opportunities to weigh in on decisions about pipeline routes and construction.

- The Federal Energy and Regulatory Commission (FERC) which regulates interstate pipelines, is funded by industry and has been criticized for biased decision-making and rubber-stamping pipeline projects. FERC has only ever disapproved one proposed natural gas pipeline³. The NC Utilities Commission has already granted a blanket approval or "Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity" to PSNC Energy to construct intrastate pipelines within its service area without any additional approvals from the Commission⁴.
- Land along pipeline routes can be taken through eminent domain, and landowners have limited options to appeal⁵.

Gas is no better than coal as a fuel to protect the climate—in fact, if drilling and fracking releases of methane are as high as several studies indicate, the production of shale gas for power production would make it a worse fuel than coal just in terms of climate impact. Only a rapid transition to energy efficient homes, businesses, industry and vehicles, along with renewable energy sources, can slow climate change and its catastrophic impacts.

- The oil & gas industry is the largest US emitter of methane, which leaks into the atmosphere during the drilling, fracking, treatment, and transport processes. Methane is 100 times more potent as a heat-trapping gas than

CO₂ during the critical first decade after emission, and 86 times more potent over 20 years, according to the latest estimates⁶.

- Duke Energy must end reliance on dirty fossil fuels. 2015 was the hottest year on record yet, completing a decade of unprecedented warming. While the 2015 COP21 Paris Accord fell dramatically short of what is needed to prevent global catastrophe, by signing it, global leaders recognized the urgency of addressing climate impacts, and have committed to adjusting their commitments upward in coming decades⁷.
- Construction of new pipelines and gas units result in "stranded costs:" as renewables, efficiency, and battery technologies continue to decrease in cost, Duke's investments in expensive gas pipelines and power plants are increasingly risky, yet customers will still be stuck with the bill for unnecessary investments!

Gas pipeline leaks and explosions endanger the climate and put local communities' health and safety at risk.

- Leaks not only have major climate impacts, they can cause acute and long-term health effects to communities all along the pipeline. Methane and gas additives are known to cause headaches, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dizziness and respiratory irritation⁸.
- The catastrophic ongoing leak in southern California that has spewed 50 metric tons of methane per hour into the air since October 2015⁹ and is still not plugged is an extreme example, but even this massive leak is less than 1% of natural gas methane emissions nationwide¹⁰.
- Methane is highly flammable, and carries the risk of major accidents. One of the largest to happen in recent US history, in San Bruno, CA, destroyed 38 homes, killed 8 people and injured dozens more. In 2014, an explosion in Buncombe County damaged local roadways, with no casualties.
- A 2014 report by the DOT Office of Inspector General initiated after the San Bruno incident found that state pipeline safety programs lack the ability and oversight to maintain safety standards. The report found problems with inspector staffing, training, scheduling, and inspection procedures, and recommended major corrective action for state programs to adequately keep intra-state pipelines safe.¹¹ While aging pipelines are vulnerable to failure, a recent analysis actually found that newly constructed pipelines have even higher failure rates than older infrastructure. Experts are still looking into this worrisome trend.¹²



¹ PSNC Energy. *Polk, Henderson and Buncombe County Gas Transmission Line Enhancement Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.psnenergy.com/about-us/service-area-map/pipeline>.

² See <http://frackfreenc.org/resources/basic-info-on-fracking/>.

³ Huffington Post. *Examining the Fracking Power of FERC*. Dec. 22, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maria-rodale/examining-the-fracking-po_b_8862760.html.

⁴ North Carolina Utilities Commission. *Natural Gas Industry*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncuc.commerce.state.nc.us/industries/naturalgas/naturalgas.htm>.

⁵ N.C. Gen. Stat ss 40A-1(7) (2006).

⁶ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis, 2013*: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>.

⁷ NY Times. *Nations Approve Landmark Climate Accord in Paris*. Dec. 12, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/world/europe/climate-change-accord-paris.html>

⁸ California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. *Aliso Canyon Emergency Response*. Retrieved from http://oehha.ca.gov/public_info/emergency/alisocanyon.html

⁹ KCET. *SoCal Gas' Aliso Canyon Leak a Disaster for Climate*. Nov. 24, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.kcet.org/news/redo/rewire/commentary/porter-ranch-leak-a-disaster-for-climate.html>.

¹⁰ New Republic. *California's Methane Leak: Climate Disaster or Opportunity?* Jan. 19, 2016. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/127988/californias-methane-leak-climate-disaster-opportunity>.

¹¹ Audit report, Office of Inspector General, Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. *PHMSA'S State Pipeline Safety Program Lacks Effective Management and Oversight*. Report Number: AV-2014-041, May 7, 2014.

¹² SNL. *As US rushes to build gas lines, failure rate of new pipes has spiked*. Sept. 9, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.snl.com/web/client?auth=inherit#news/article?id=33791090&KeyProductLinkType=0&cid=A-33791090-11060>