

RASMUSSEN: Wildfires pose major threat to pipeline safety



Smoke from a forest fire in the Pinelands is seen from an observation tower in Tabernacle, Burlington County, in 2012. (Photo: File photo)

During a birthday celebration on our back deck Sunday, my family smelled what families throughout central Jersey have noticed in our air for the past several days — smoke and haze from the wildfires burning on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst. New to us were the flurries of falling ash from the fires, which have consumed hundreds of acres. The smell of smoke was being reported as far away as my office in Somerset County, more than 60 miles from the fires.

New Jerseyans have long been familiar with fires at the base — my grandmother remembers seeing a distant fire from her Jackson backyard on May 6, 1937, which turned out to be the Hindenburg burning at Lakehurst.

A story in April's *Rolling Stone* found that the Pinelands, home of the Joint Base, could be the site of "the single most destructive fire in U.S. history." It cited a State of New Jersey Wildfire Risk Assessment that compared the Pinelands to "an inch of gasoline covering all of south and central New Jersey." New Jersey classifies the Pinelands as "one of the most hazardous wildland fuel types in the nation." Indeed, Ocean County alone recorded 692 wildfires from 1924 to 2007, with 533,812 acres burned.

Given the substantial population growth within the region, you might naturally assume that the state would have a compelling interest in aggressively pursuing public policies that minimize the

sources of fuel for wildfires. You'd be wrong. In spite of the thoroughly documented hazard of wildfires in the immediate proximity, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities recently approved New Jersey Natural Gas' plans to build a transmission pipeline carrying a massive volume of flammable gas — 180,000 dekatherms daily — under a high pressure of 722 pounds per square inch — right through the middle of New Jersey's "ground zero" of wildfires.

The state's 2014 Hazard Mitigation Plan is unambiguous about the dangers of such an ill-conceived proposal: "... in the event of a wildfire, pipelines that provide a source of fuel could be ignited, leading to a catastrophic explosion."

According to the state's Hazard Mitigation Plan, "County Route 539 runs through the center of the Pinelands and has been impacted by several wildfires in the past decade. The stretches of this roadway that are the most vulnerable are located in the southern portions of Burlington and Ocean Counties" — the exact spot where NJNG plans to build its pipeline.

Both NJNG and South Jersey Gas, which is planning to build yet another pipeline through a different part of the Pinelands, are quick to point out that pipeline infrastructure is underground, often under roadways. Out of sight, out of mind. Except that the pipeline's single-biggest vulnerability to wildfires may be the above-ground valve assemblies that NJNG plans to build into the pipeline at intervals of every five miles or so. The exposure of this infrastructure to wildfires is particularly troubling.

Another concern is a roadway's propensity to melt during a wildfire, as happened to a stretch of Route 539 in 1995. Wildfires also have been known to involve the entirety of Route 539, jumping from one side of the road to the other.

Despite the documented fact that wildfires in the proximity of the pipeline are a routine matter of when, and not if, the entire project approval process offers no discussion of wildfires or how NJNG plans to mitigate them. No thought or consideration as to how the pipeline would interfere with firefighting efforts or human evacuations. Glaringly, not a single, apparent mention about how NJNG will seek to limit or block prescribed or controlled burns in the area around its new pipeline, even though these burns are among our firefighters' most effective tools.

Before the first shovel ever hits the ground, federal, state, county and local officials outside of the public utility community must take a closer look at whether it is safe to bring a massive fuel source directly through the middle of one of the nation's most dangerous tinder boxes for wildfires — much less one that happens to be in the most densely populated state. No matter where you stand on energy issues, this new threat is something that should concern all of us.

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