

Dangers of storing natural gas always present

Susan Meeker, Colusa Sun-Herald, 9-14-10

Colusa County officials had safety concerns on their mind as they approved a natural gas storage project near Princeton on Monday.

The natural gas line explosion that leveled a Bay Area neighborhood Thursday evening brought home the reality that storing or transmitting the gas, while overwhelmingly successful, has some level of danger.

"The event in San Bruno is on everyone's mind," said Jim Kiefer, Central Valley Gas Storage project manager. "It was a tragic event."

The risk, however, didn't keep the Colusa County Planning Commission from giving the company the green light to move forward with development once the California Public Utility Commission grants final approval.

Kiefer said Central Valley Gas Storage, a subsidiary of Illinois-based Nicor Inc., has numerous safeguards in place and has provided assurances to the county that the project will be constructed and maintained in accordance with existing policies, rules and regulations.

The Public Utility is set to make a final decision on the project Oct. 23, Kiefer said.

The project site is about 2 miles southwest of Princeton, 13 miles north of Colusa, west of state Highway 45, above two former natural gas reservoirs approximately 2,200 feet below the surface. The reservoirs produced about 9.8 billion cubic feet of natural gas between 1954 and 1992, according to Kiefer.

The project will sit on approximately 10 acres of leased farmland, and house an 11,500-horsepower compression station and nine injection-withdrawal wells and will employ six to eight full-time workers once in service.

Once constructed, the company plans to inject approximately 8 billion cubic feet of natural gas into a subsurface geological rock formation, converting a former gas-producing reservoir into a storage field.

The storage will allow Central Valley to transmit gas during peak market demands to the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. compression station north of Maxwell, via a 14-mile, 24-inch pipeline through the Delevan area.

"There are 290,000 miles of gas transmission lines in the U.S., enough to go around the world 10 times," Kiefer said.

Kiefer said the company has secured the cooperation of all but one private landowner in the area whose property will be used for the pipeline.

The company is working to educate landowners about the project, and continues to work with Princeton Fire District — the primary service provider in the event of emergencies, Kiefer said.

"We still have some concerns," said Manuel Masa, fire district director, "but we are getting everything worked out."

As far as safety, Kiefer said the biggest risk to the pipeline, which will be 5 feet below the surface, is the use of

backhoes by farmers.

"There will be signage on the fields," Kiefer said.

The storage facility will be the first in California for Nicor, and its first utilizing a depleted gas reservoir.

Nicor's Illinois storage facilities utilize water aquifers rather than depleted gas fields, Kiefer said.

The Central Valley Princeton project has had significant support from community organizations and county officials, who see it as a project compatible with agriculture that will produce both temporary construction jobs and the full-time, permanent jobs.