

Udall Amendment to the PIPES Act

Summary: The amendment requires the Pipeline and Hazardous Material Safety Administration (PHMSA) limit the release of methane gas into the environment in three ways:

1. Require companies to use advanced leak detection technologies to better identify and repair environmentally hazardous leaks, in order to limit methane releases.
2. Operators are required to create a plan to minimize methane leaks as a part of their inspection and maintenance plans.
3. PHMSA must consider regulations that would require operators to take steps to reduce intentional natural gas releases that occur when pipes are vented or repaired.

Leak Detection: This Udall amendment requires PHMSA to establish leak detection and repair programs for certain gathering, distribution and transmission natural gas operators. The final standards must reflect the capabilities of commercially available advanced technologies. In addition, the provision requires PHMSA to address environmentally hazardous leaks, rather than just safety related leaks. These would be the first PHMSA gas pipeline regulations that require operators to address natural gas leaks that are hazardous to the environment.

Repair: This provision requires pipeline operators to repair and replace all leaks, unless they are so small that they don't pose a hazard.

Inspection and Maintenance Plans: The Udall amendment requires an operator's inspection and maintenance plan to address the ways it will minimize the release of natural gas, and replace or remediate pipes made out of cast iron and other leaky materials. PHMSA must review the plans for adequacy, something that the agency was not previously required to do. Finally, to help ensure thorough reviews, the Government Accountability Office ("GAO") is required to review the plans and prepare recommendations for PHMSA on how to improve them. PHMSA must respond to the GAO recommendations in a report to Congress.

Reducing Intentional Releases. This Udall amendment requires PHMSA to consider ways for pipeline operators to reduce the release of natural gas in the design, construction, and maintenance of natural gas systems. PHMSA is then instructed to pursue a rulemaking, if determined to be necessary, to require operators to take steps that would reduce the release of methane. PHMSA could mandate practices that reduce the need for venting, limiting gas released during blow downs, and the use of gas capture technologies during pipeline repairs.