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PIPELINES

PHMSA nominee dodges pipeline questions

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The Trump administration's nominee to lead the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration easily navigated a confirmation hearing before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee yesterday, highlighting his four decades of experience in the rail industry and deflecting questions about the agency's role in pipeline oversight with promises to study up.

Howard "Skip" Elliott shared the floor during the two-hour confirmation hearing with three other nominees for positions at the Commerce Department and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. He fielded a handful of questions about PHMSA's work on rail safety and a backlog of pipeline-related regulations and initiatives.

In an opening statement, Elliott said he looked forward to "delivering safety enhancements that protect the public and the environment, while allowing for the uninterrupted, multimodal transportation of energy products and other hazardous commodities that are necessary and essential to our daily lives." He pointed to his experience responding to hazardous material incidents in the rail industry as the basis for a strong emphasis on inspections and worker training.



Pipeline and Hazardous Materials
Safety Administration nominee Howard
Elliott. Elliott/LinkedIn

Faced with questions about the challenges that face the agency in overseeing pipelines, though, Elliott said he was still learning the basics.

Sen. Ed Markey, the Massachusetts Democrat who is an outspoken critic of the fossil fuel industry, asked Elliott if he was prepared to work quickly to harmonize PHMSA's reporting on the leakage of natural gas from pipelines with those of the Energy Information Administration as required under a 2016 safety law.

Elliott responded that a meeting with Markey last week "was really my first exposure to the topic of lost and unaccounted-for natural gas," promising to "look into this with great haste."

Markey also pressed Elliott to provide unredacted pipeline spill response plans to the committee, an issue that he said the committee had pursued on a bipartisan basis last year, to no avail. The nominee said he would look into why the agency has not shared the information.

In response to a question from Sen. Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) on what he would do to fulfill a series of pipeline safety and other mandates that remain unaddressed since passage of the Pipeline Safety Act in 2011, Elliott again promised to get up to speed quickly.

"If I am confirmed, one of the top priorities will be to work with PHMSA staff and this committee to understand which of those mandates are most critical ... to ensure that those that have the greatest impact to safety can be completed," he said.

Asked by E&E News to address how he would, if confirmed, address the president's 2-for-1 regulatory reform order, Elliott deferred all questions to PHMSA's congressional affairs staff. The order says that for every new regulation agencies publish, they must eliminate two existing rules ([Climatewire](#), Jan. 31).

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