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## States look for ways to prevent cheating on pipeline contractor tests

By [Sarah Smith](#)

State pipeline safety managers are increasingly focused on trying to prevent the workers who build and maintain natural gas utility pipelines from cheating on their qualification exams.

With [multiple instances](#) of pipeline contractors cheating on qualification tests discovered in the past year, regulators are scrutinizing utilities' safeguards that are supposed to prevent underhanded conduct, said Jason Montoya, chief of the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission's Pipeline Safety Bureau.

"Operators may have a more difficult time proving to us regulatory bodies: 'This is how the tests are proctored, this is how we have quality control and assurance that cheating was not done,'" Montoya said in an interview at the National Association of Pipeline Safety Representatives', or NAPSRS, annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio.

"Prove to me, Mr. Operator, how you control your tests," Montoya said. "If you have had the same answers for the last five years and the same questions in the same order, there's a test out there that has them."

State utility commissions do not typically have regulatory authority over contractors that work for utilities. Rather, utilities are responsible for ensuring the people who work on their pipeline systems are qualified to do so, and the commissions evaluate the utilities' efficacy.

Qualification testing applies to so-called covered tasks, which can include welding, pipe burying, leak surveying, corrosion monitoring and dozens of other common contractor job duties. How to reliably test workers on these tasks remains a subject of debate.

"In this day and age, with these things [smart phones], you can take pictures of [test] screens," said Peter Chace, the NAPSRS chair and the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio's safety program manager. "Personally, I wish operators would rely less on written tests for qualification."

New York found in late 2016 that two contract companies were cheating on written exams. In 2017, Virginia regulators have been [investigating](#) similar cheating by contractors working for some of the largest gas utilities in the state. A contractor trainer in Virginia made hard copies of what were supposed to be confidential tests and gave prospective test takers access to the materials, the state's pipeline safety program manager said at the NAPSRS meeting.

Chace sees oral exams as one way of addressing some of the flaws in written tests. Oral tests not only are difficult to copy, but they also add an element of accountability to the qualification process. The test giver, rather than an inanimate document, can be held accountable for giving an unqualified person a passing score.

For Montoya, oral exams run the risk of allowing too much discretion on the part of the test administrators, who may have a "good old boy" mentality of helping workers based on relationships and not on merit. Montoya said he would want all oral exams recorded on video to allow inspectors to check participants' conduct.

Chace said he hopes NAPSRS can work with federal pipeline safety regulators to strengthen the oversight of contractor qualifications, but he acknowledged that the regulatory community has not reached a consensus on what would be most effective.

"Just talking to us, you can tell it's a complicated issue," Chace said. "Our sense is that something is wrong. How to fix it? We're not sure yet."

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