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Federal pipeline regulator may revisit locational safety classifications

By Sarah Smith

The federal pipeline safety regulator is considering revising how it classifies pipelines based on location, which has implications for construction and operating requirements.

The U.S. Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration is in the middle of reviewing its regulations, in large part because of President Donald Trump's policy initiative requiring agencies to identify two rules to take off the books for each new regulation proposed. Class location rules could be a target for removal or scaling back, Linda Daugherty, PHMSA's deputy associate administrator for pipeline safety, said Sept. 26 at the National Association of Pipeline Safety Representatives' annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio.

At present, transmission pipes are classified based on the population density in the area around the lines, with class 1 representing rural lines and class 4 applying to densely populated areas. Higher-class pipelines have stricter requirements across a host of areas, including the amount of stress a pipe should be able to take, maximum allowable operating pressures, how often a pipe should be inspected, and the pressures at which pipes have to be tested.

In the coming months, PHMSA expects to issue an advanced notice of proposed rulemaking, or ANPRM, related to class locations. The notice would be more likely to be a request for input than a specific proposal, Daugherty said on the sidelines of the event.

PHMSA has been taking input from stakeholders as part of the regulatory review and has heard from some in the pipeline industry that they would like to see class location requirements revisited, she said.

"Is this an issue where the time is right? It's been floating around for years," Daugherty said. The ANPRM would look for answers to that question, along with an understanding of whether lifting the class location requirements would translate to a net positive or negative from a safety perspective, she said.

Class locations change over time as areas develop and more people move in, which can create problems, said Peter Chace, who chairs the pipeline safety representatives association.

If a line was built to class 1 construction standards and the population density around the pipe increases, bumping up the class, an operator finds itself with a substandard pipeline, even if the construction standards were appropriate when the pipe was installed, Chace said in an interview. He also serves as the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio's pipeline program manager.

Operational requirements are different, though, he said. Adjusting operating pressures and inspection intervals based on the surrounding population is far more possible than altering the physical characteristics of a pipe that has already been laid.

Daugherty encouraged the association's members, who include the pipeline safety managers for most states in the U.S., to offer feedback when the ANPRM comes out.