

U.S. SENATOR DEB FISCHER

*Opening Remarks – Subcommittee on Surface Transportation & Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, & Security
September 29, 2015 – “Pipeline Safety: Oversight of our Nation’s Pipeline Network”*

Good afternoon. I am pleased to convene the Senate Subcommittee on Surface Transportation & Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety and Security for our ninth hearing, titled “Pipeline Safety: Oversight of our Nation’s Pipeline Network.”

Pipeline infrastructure transports vital energy resources to homes, businesses, schools, and commercial centers across the United States. According to the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), more than 2.5 million miles of pipelines traverse the United States.¹

¹ PHMSA statistics, <https://primis.phmsa.dot.gov/comm/PipelineBasics.htm>.

Half a million miles of pipeline transports natural gas, oil, and hazardous materials to critical infrastructure, including power plants, military bases, and airports.² In addition, pipelines move approximately 75 percent of our nation's crude oil and 60 percent of our refined petroleum products.³

In order to protect the safety and natural resources of Nebraskans, and all Americans, Congress must maintain robust oversight over PHMSA's activities.

State and federal officials must also ensure that pipelines across the country can continue operating efficiently. After all, pipelines are renowned as the safest way to transport crude oil and natural gas.⁴

² CRS: <http://www.crs.gov/Reports/R41536?source=search>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Manhattan Institute: "Pipelines are safest for Transportation," http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ib_23.pdf.

Two weeks ago, I travelled to Montana with Senators Daines and Tester to convene a field hearing on the importance of state and local perspectives in pipeline safety. With an excellent panel of witnesses, our hearing focused on the safe movement of liquid materials on rural pipelines.

We heard from the newly-confirmed PHMSA Administrator about the agency's organizational assessment, aimed at re-focusing resources and streamlining PHMSA's work.

Thanks to an inquiry by Senator Daines, we learned that pipeline operators are seeking faster turnaround times on the results of PHMSA inspections, which can often take more than a year.⁵

⁵ Subcommittee Hearing, Billings, Montana, September 18, 2015, "Pipeline Safety: State and Local Perspectives."

Today's hearing will focus on the transportation of natural gas throughout our nation's vast pipeline network.

In addition to natural gas pipeline operators, we are fortunate to have pipeline inspections technology represented, as well as officials from the Government Accountability Office and the National Transportation Safety Board.

As many of you are aware, in 2010, a natural gas pipeline exploded in San Bruno, California, killing eight people, injuring 60 people, and destroying 37 homes.⁶ Most experts cite this incident as among the worst pipeline accidents in recent history.

In March 2014, a natural gas pipeline in Fremont, Nebraska, exploded, burning for

⁶ CRS.

nearly four hours.⁷ Fortunately, this accident took place in the middle of a corn field and no one was injured.

Through stronger oversight and collaboration between stakeholders, we can be better prepared for pipeline incidents.

I look forward to hearing how natural gas pipeline operators are working with local communities and PHMSA on risk-based approaches to preventing pipeline accidents.

Most importantly, we must work to help PHMSA re-prioritize and complete the outstanding requirements from the 2011 PHMSA reauthorization bill.⁸

⁷ KETV, 2014 Freemont

⁸ PHMSA. "PHMSA Progress Tracker." <http://www.phmsa.dot.gov/pipeline/psa/phmsa-progress-tracker-chart>

Although PHMSA has made substantial progress, the agency must work to complete the remaining requirements to provide regulatory certainty to industry and local communities.

With regard to staffing, PHMSA is experiencing challenges competing with the private sector for highly-skilled labor. I would like to explore the ways in which we can work together to accelerate the agency's hiring practices.

I hope to learn more about PHMSA's work with pipeline operators on the agency's risk-based "integrity management" assessment programs, and pipeline inspection requirements.

Accurate and ample data is key to the success of PHMSA's integrity management

program. PHMSA should continue to work with stakeholders on best practices for data-sharing to better educate ancillary industries and the public on pipeline safety. This is especially important when it comes to high consequence areas, including drinking aquifers, environmentally delicate regions, and population centers.

Thank you all again for being here today. Together, I am certain we can pass a bipartisan reauthorization bill that enhances pipeline safety for all Americans.

I would now like to invite Senator Booker to offer opening remarks.