

Public Comment on H.51, H.175, H.214  
April 22, 2019

To the members of the Vermont House Committee on Energy and Technology:

Prior to becoming a minister, I was a longtime technology reporter for the New York Times, writer for Energy User News, and, as a law student, contributor to the University of California School of Law's Ecology Law Quarterly. I have been following the "progress" and practices of the fossil fuel industry for more than four decades.

I do *not* think these industries are filled with evil people who are arguing against these bills and downplaying the damage their industry does in building out their infrastructure solely out of a lust for personal and shareholder profits, as some would have it. I believe natural gas is safer than some of my fellow opponents argue and does provide real, short-term benefits to many businesses. Nor do I think legislators who are reluctant to support these bills are holding back solely because they believe supporting these bills will cost them their seats. But I do believe that, as Upton Sinclair once said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary (or power) depends on not understanding it."

What needs to be understood here, above all else, is that further long-term investment in fossil fuels is no longer in Vermont's interest. Our brand needs to be "the nation's leader in renewable, sustainable energy use," for our own economic benefit as well as part of the struggle for climate justice. The sooner we get there, the better for our chances to recruit and hang on to the businesses we need to employ future Vermonters. If our brand is "Watching leaders in renewable energy elsewhere with great interest while doubling down on fossil fuel," our youth will be leaving at an ever-accelerating rate.

All of the industry testimony needs to be seen through that lens. They will argue until the cows come home that they have a cleaner energy option to offer compared to what is now in the market, which may or may not be currently true in some cases but is beside the point given the time-scale of the investment. And they will argue that building new gas pipelines is a wise "transitional" step to a green energy future we all agree is necessary. All you need to know is this:

- 1) A truly transitional use of gas pipelines would be structured to deliver all -- not some -- profits to energy efficiency investments and speeding the adoption of renewable alternatives that burn no fossil fuels. A truly transitional use of gas pipelines would prominently feature plans for retiring routine dependency on natural gas, especially fracked natural gas, asap. If it's going to be truly transitional and in the public interest, the public has to fund it because private industry has no capability to go that direction;
- 2) The real intent is to force a very long-term investment in fossil fuels on Vermont on terms that will inevitably undermine public and private investment in renewable energy research and deployment;
- 3) Further pipelines will exert market pressure on gas companies to pursue technologies that will fail in ways and with a frequency they have a strong incentive to label as unforeseeable (and thus, to do that, they will not willingly invest in research and systems that would be more expensive but make the hazards more visible); protection of the public interest in this regard will require much more aggressive and expensive regulation and research by public authorities. It will also invite Vermont to employ a morally

bankrupt, narrow definition of public interest -- water destroyed in western Canada  
generating gas for us? -- not our problem, buddy.

4) Life-cycle costing (including funding elimination of the long-term hazards of retired  
pipelines deteriorating in place in our soils) has never been a part of the industry's price  
model -- it's a potentially huge externality (a problem, to be fair, that also exists for solar  
and other renewable energy technologies).

Thanks for your work and your attention,  
Rev. Barnaby Feder, Middlebury, Vt.