

PI-77-0107

October 17, 1977

Honorable Andy Ireland
1513 Longworth House
Office Building
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Ireland:

In response to your letter of September 12, 1977, we are stating the views of the Materials Transportation Bureau on Mr. Jesse R. Lowe's comments about the Federal gas pipeline safety regulations.

Mr. Lowe questions the benefit of the regulations in light of statistics released by the National Transportation Safety Board, showing that in 1976 only 82 persons died in pipeline accidents while over 44,000 persons were killed in highway accidents. Although it is true that deaths from pipelines are relatively small when compared to other modes of transportation, gas pipelines present a potential for catastrophe that the public will not tolerate without proper Government regulation of safety. If left unattended, the many thousands of gas leaks which annually occur nationwide could lead to major disasters. For example, 20 of the 82 deaths in 1976 resulted from a single incident at a hotel in Fremont, Nebraska. Gas leaking from a 2-inch plastic pipeline seeped into the hotel beneath frozen earth and concrete where it exploded, destroying the hotel and damaging nearby buildings. Based in part on an investigation of this incident, the Office of Pipeline Safety Operations is developing new safety standards for the installation of plastic pipe.

We do not believe that Mr. Lowe's assessment of his company's cost of compliance with the safety standards should be taken as an example of the impact the standards have had on the gas industry. For the most part, the standards have been based on actual safety practices followed by prudent gas operators or on self-imposed industrial standards. Viewed in this respect, we believe the true cost of compliance to the industry has not been much above the cost that would have been met in the absence of the Federal standards.

I would like to suggest that you advise Mr. Lowe that our procedures under 49 CFR Part 102 (copy enclosed) permit interested persons line him to request changes in the safety standards that are considered too burdensome or expensive in comparison with the benefits to be achieved. Mr. Lowe is also free to request a waiver from compliance with any standard which appears to be inappropriate when applied to a particular situation.

Sincerely,

John J. Fearnside
Acting Director