

Pipeline inspections are underway

Each year, around the middle of April, NorthWestern Energy undertakes a huge project – physically inspecting 2,100 miles of its gas pipeline system.

“Mainly, we want to make sure the system is safe,” said Kevin Cicon, gas patrolman operator based in Augusta, Mont.

On occasion, inspectors may need to access your property to complete the survey. They drive clearly marked vehicles, wear bright yellow vests and clothing that identifies them as NorthWestern Energy employees or contractors, and carry appropriate identification.

NorthWestern does not notify individual customers about inspection crews accessing their property, but the company does run ads in local newspapers and radio stations around the time they’ll be in a specific area.

Inspections are done about half on foot and half on ATV. In towns, crews use handheld flame ionization tools to detect leaks. In more rural areas, they ride ATVs along pipelines.

NorthWestern’s gas pipeline system runs throughout the western half of Montana, the east side of South Dakota and into a small portion of Nebraska. That means the buried pipes are in prairies, mountains and everything in between.

“We get to see a lot of country most people don’t get to see,” Kevin said.

Understanding pipeline markers and pipeline safety

Pipeline markers

Markers show the approximate location of pipelines and identify the companies that operate them. Pipeline operators are required to place markers, sometimes called right-of-way markers, at all public road and railroad crossings. These markers indicate the pipeline content, the name of the pipeline operator and the operator’s emergency phone number. Please note that even if the pipeline is marked, you must contact 811 for utility line locates before digging. The pipeline may not follow in a straight course between markers.

Pipeline monitoring

As a pipeline operator, we monitor the status of our pipelines seven days a week, 24 hours a day to ensure they are safe and secure. We use computers, alarms, meters and satellite technology to control and check our pipelines. The monitoring systems detect changes in pressure and flow and can activate warnings and safeguards if a leak is detected.

HCA’s and IMP

Federal pipeline safety regulations use the concept of High Consequence Areas, or HCA’s, to identify specific locations and areas where an accidental release of natural gas could have the most significant adverse consequences. Once an HCA has been identified, operators devote additional focus to ensure the integrity of pipelines in that area. We have in place an Integrity Management Program, or IMP, that defines the steps and timelines for identifying HCA’s, assessing the integrity of the pipelines and taking aggressive steps to mitigate the risks to people and property near HCA’s.



Customer notice: Responsibility of privately owned gas and propane lines

The maintenance of buried gas piping downstream of the gas meter to gas-fired appliances or other various structures on the property is the responsibility of the home/property owner or current occupant.

NorthWestern Energy is required to inform customers with privately owned natural gas or propane service lines of their responsibility to inspect and maintain their piping (Code of Federal Regulations 49 CFR 192.16). Customers should have the pipes periodically inspected for leaks, and metallic pipes should also be inspected for corrosion by qualified professionals, such as a local plumber.

Any unsafe conditions should be repaired immediately or the flow of gas should be shut off. Piping that is not maintained may be subject to corrosion or leaking. When digging near buried gas pipes, the pipes should be located in advance and the excavation done by hand. (Note that an 811 line location does not identify these lines and may require a private contractor to locate privately owned lines).

Excess flow valve can protect your home from severe gas leaks

If a gas service is installed at your home, you have the option to purchase an excess flow valve, or EFV, to be installed by NorthWestern Energy. An EFV is intended to stop the flow of gas if the service line is severed. The EFV is placed on the service line where it leaves the gas main.

An EFV will stop the flow of gas only if the service line is severely damaged. It is important to note that an EFV will not protect you from a leak or broken line inside your home, or a small leak on the service line in your yard. The valve provides protection in the event the gas service is damaged from digging or extreme ground movement.

As required by the U.S. Department of Transportation, we are notifying you that an EFV that meets the minimum prescribed DOT performance standards is available for installation on your natural gas service line.

The cost of installing the EFV will need to be evaluated by an engineer. If you are interested, please contact your local NorthWestern Energy office to set up an appointment. Payment is required prior to installation of the EFV.

Our COVID-19 response

The April edition of Energy Connections went to print in the middle of our response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Look for the May Energy Connections for more information on our response to the pandemic, or visit NorthWesternEnergy.com/COVID to learn more.