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NEWS

NW Natural cancels west Eugene hydrogen blending project



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NW Natural is canceling its plans to blend hydrogen into parts of its west Eugene natural gas pipeline system.

The utility in August filed plans with the Oregon Public Utility Commission signaling it would incorporate hydrogen into its natural gas pipelines, a small-scale test of how blending the non-carbon fuel may one day reduce systemwide greenhouse gas emissions. NW Natural withdrew the plans Tuesday, citing concerns raised by some of its customers.

NW Natural was going to build an electrolyzer, which splits water's hydrogen and oxygen molecules, on Eugene Water and Electric Board property in west Eugene. It planned to use the hydrogen it created by injecting it into the pipes with existing natural gas, reducing by between 5%-10% the amount of carbon fuel serving its customers in the pilot project.

More: NW Natural plans to blend hydrogen into some west Eugene customers' gas

NW Natural, in its PUC filing Tuesday withdrawing their plans, said it had heard those concerns and agreed to cancel its plans at least until more stakeholder outreach could be conducted.

About 2,300 residential, 160 commercials, and six industrial west Eugene customers would have gotten blended natural gas through the pilot project, NW Natural Business Development Segment Manager Chris Kroeker said in August.

But hydrogen blending is a relatively new technology. While it's used in some European and U.S. pipelines, the practice has raised concerns about safety, cost and the potential to distract from more reliable efforts to reduce GHG emissions.

Some Eugene-area environmental groups opposed the plan and called for the PUC to reject the NW Natural project.

“This should be a lesson, not just for NW Natural but for all toxic polluters – the west Eugene community is not a sacrifice zone,” Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, one of the organizations which opposed the project, said in a news release. “Eugene residents will not be forced to be guinea pigs for experimental and dangerous technology that perpetrates fossil fuel infrastructure, environmental injustices and more air toxics. This project was absolutely unacceptable, and its withdrawal is a testament to the power of community opposition.”

More: Groups oppose NW Natural plan to blend hydrogen with Eugene natural gas

The utility said in its filing it had considered putting the plans on hold, but is withdrawing the application instead so its timeframe for community engagement isn't limited.

"The company was concerned that seeking to suspend or pause the procedural schedule would create the erroneous impression that this additional outreach is merely a 'check-the-box' exercise, and that NW Natural is unwilling to actually incorporate community input into the project," the filing read.

"By withdrawing its application, NW Natural is seeking to convey that it is willing to engage in stakeholder outreach without a predefined time limit that would have been included as part of a motion to suspend the procedural schedule, and that it is willing to consider changes to the project in light of such outreach as well as potentially other factors, such as the Inflation Reduction Act, which was not passed when the project application was submitted."

The filing said NW Natural still believes hydrogen blending can be safely used to reduce GHG emissions. The filing said the utility may file a new application once it has conducted more outreach with local stakeholders.

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