

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

September 13, 2023

Tristan Brown  
Deputy Administrator  
Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Deputy Administrator Brown,

Today marks the fifth anniversary of the Merrimack Valley natural gas distribution system disaster. On that day, the unimaginable struck the communities of Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover, when a series of natural gas explosions claimed the life of 18-year-old Leonel Rondon, injured more than twenty people, and led 50,000 residents to be asked to evacuate across the region.<sup>1</sup> In total, more than 100 homes, businesses and other structures experienced fires and explosions.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the physical scars and the economic damage to the region, this tragedy continues to haunt our communities across the Merrimack Valley.

To help prevent a similar catastrophe from ever happening again, we introduced the *Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act* in April 2019. The bill, which was signed into law as part of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021* (P.L. 116-260), emphasized safety measures designed to stop such disasters before they ever begin, such as requiring that qualified employees approve any changes to pipeline systems and monitor gas system pressure on-site during construction. On September 13, 2018, it took nearly 30 minutes from when the high-pressure alarms sounded until the flow of natural gas was controlled by an on-site technician—during that time, over-pressurized and highly flammable natural gas surged into homes across the Merrimack Valley. That should never happen again—alarms should be followed by action, which is why our legislation required technological redundancies at regulator stations to provide back-up protection against future disasters. It also mandated that natural gas distribution system operators assemble, maintain, and make available maps and records of the pipeline system that are traceable, reliable, and complete. Finally, in the event that a crisis does happen again, this legislation required better communications from pipeline companies to the first responders and the public. The new emergency response communication protocol would ensure that the brave first responders who come to the rescue in the event of an emergency have the information they need, when they need it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pipeline Accident Report: Overpressurization of Natural Gas Distribution System, Explosions, and Fires in Merrimack Valley, Massachusetts*, National Transportation Safety Board (Nov. 7, 2019), <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/PAR1902.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Since the bill's passage, we greatly appreciate the work the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) has undertaken to implement this lifesaving legislation. We were glad to see PHMSA's announcement last month of a proposed rulemaking, as required by the *Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act*, which would help improve the safe operation of millions of miles of pipelines across the country.<sup>3</sup> We applaud this work and encourage PHMSA to finalize the strongest possible regulations to keep our communities safe. Unfortunately, the alternative is the unthinkable – another community being forced to endure the devastation we experienced five years ago.

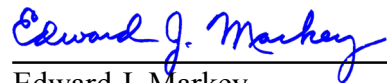
We look forward to continuing to work with PHMSA to successfully implement this critical law and better protect our communities from natural gas pipeline system disasters.

Sincerely,



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Lori Trahan  
Member of Congress




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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



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Seth Moulton  
Member of Congress



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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

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<sup>3</sup> Pipeline Safety: Safety of Gas Distribution Pipelines and Other Pipeline Safety Initiatives, 88 Fed. Reg. 61,746 (Sept. 7, 2023).