

## E&E Energywire

### Whistleblower alleges safety problems on Pa. pipeline

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A sinkhole opened at the back of a home in West Whiteland Township, Pa., on Jan. 20, 2019, exposing part of a natural gas liquids pipeline owned by Energy Transfer. Del-Chesco United for Pipeline Safety/Facebook

A geologist who worked on the Mariner East 2 pipeline said he was ordered to ignore potentially dangerous problems with construction of the natural gas liquids line and was booted from the project when he didn't.

In a letter to federal, state and local officials, the geologist's attorney compared the situation on Mariner East 2 to problems that led to an explosion in 2018 in a neighborhood outside Pittsburgh on another pipeline owned by Dallas-based Energy Transfer LP ([Energywire](#), Jan. 6).

"It may only be a matter of time before something similar will occur on this or other [Mariner East 2] sites," Tim Fitchett wrote.

Fitchett's letter identifies his client only as "Mr. Kovarik" and says he was working as a hydrogeologist for a contractor at a Mariner East 2 site in West Chester, Pa., in the Philadelphia suburbs. Kovarik has also filed a whistleblower complaint with the Department of Labor.

Fitchett, a staff attorney with Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services in Pittsburgh, is also representing a Pennsylvania environmental group called Clean Air Council, which formally

threatened legal action against Energy Transfer last week for water pollution problems in connection with the whistleblower's claims.

The **letter** said Kovarik was banned from the site May 18, after alerting Energy Transfer officials and his bosses that a "subsidence," or sinkhole, was expanding next to the path of the high-pressure pipeline, being built to carry highly volatile liquids such as ethane.

That "conduct indicates indifference to the safety hazards posed," Fitchett's letter said.

An Energy Transfer spokeswoman said the geologist was simply a "disgruntled former employee" who was removed from the project for "repeated improper conduct."

"Once again, the Clean Air Council is peddling false and slanderous information," company spokeswoman Vicki Granado said. "The Clean Air Council's allegations are baseless, and we are confident that we will prevail in the legal process."

The allegations are not the first suggestion of improper oversight of the 350-mile Mariner East 2 pipeline project. In June, a former X-ray examiner pleaded guilty to falsifying records about the safety of welds (***Energywire***, June 23).

Kovarik alleges geologists were ordered to limit their review of the path of the pipeline even if there were dangerous features just outside their specified zones, blocked from talking with construction crews to exchange important information and told to downplay other potential problems in reports. He also said nongeologists are editing the official reports of professional geologists.

Furthermore, he said the company has been using nonbiodegradable drilling fluid in environmentally sensitive areas. The project has had numerous spills of drilling fluid, which the company says is harmless. A spill of drilling fluid into a popular local lake, which is a drinking water source, provoked an uproar in the Philadelphia suburbs (***Energywire***, Sept. 14).

At least one local government, East Goshen Township, has announced its leaders are alarmed about potential hazards and are conferring with attorneys "to determine next steps." Pipeline opponents say they expect more governments to look at legal action.

Fitchett's letter was sent to EPA, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), state Attorney General Josh Shapiro (D), the state Public Utility Commission, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, and other entities. Fitchett said he's heard back from only DEP and Shapiro and is disappointed with the response.

"The reason we sent it out was to get someone to investigate," he said. "We don't know how dangerous it is because no one has looked into it."

The three-pipeline Mariner East project has been plagued with problems such as leaks, spills, water contamination and even criminal charges. Another problem has been sinkholes. The

location where Kovarik was working is about 5 miles away from another set of sinkholes that prompted the company to buy out some homeowners.

Mariner East has also drawn opposition from many residents in its path, who say the pipeline shouldn't have been built so close to homes and schools. They say a rupture could cause a catastrophe in the densely populated area ([\*Energywire\*](#), Oct. 15).

One staunch opponent is Eric Friedman, head of a homeowner's association that is fighting the pipeline. He said Kovarik's allegations appear to show Energy Transfer caused dangerous problems to be concealed in densely populated areas.

"The only rational course of action is a halt to all highly volatile liquids pipeline construction and operations," Friedman said, "and a full review of the conditions along the entire proposed route by an independent third party."