

Guest columnist

Pipeline safety: Don't sacrifice the good for the perfect

By Patty Murray

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When it comes to protecting our communities from the threat of unsafe pipelines, Sen. Slade Gorton and I agree that strict new safety standards must be signed into law this year.

Earlier this month, the United States Senate passed strong legislation to raise pipeline safety standards. Improving pipeline safety has been my highest priority since June 10 of last year, when my sister called me from Shuksan Middle School and said, "Our whole world just blew up." Each and every day, I carry with me the images of the Bellingham pipeline explosion, the devastation that followed, and a great sadness for the three young people we lost that day. I have immense respect and admiration for the families of Stephen, Wade and Liam. They have given so much so that other families won't endure their pain.

Back in January, when I introduced the first pipeline safety reform bill, I outlined the areas that needed reform. Importantly, the Senate-passed bill includes real progress on the areas I've been working on since the Bellingham tragedy.

Under the Senate-passed bill: pipelines will be inspected periodically, operators will be required to demonstrate their qualifications, whistle-blowers will be protected, and violators face harsher penalties. Pipeline companies will be required to develop comprehensive safety and inspection plans. States will get new authority, citizen groups will have a role, and the public will have a right to know about the pipelines in their communities. This bill doesn't just raise pipeline safety standards. It gives us the tools, enforcement, and funding to ensure pipeline companies reach those standards.

The tragic explosions in Bellingham and in New Mexico have forever changed the way we all look at pipelines. We now know that previous pipeline safety reform efforts, the Office of Pipeline Safety, and the industry itself have done an inadequate job of protecting the public. All across the country, communities are calling for Congress to reform the unacceptable status quo. The Senate has responded to the calls for change. The Senate-passed bill is the toughest pipeline safety reform ever adopted by either body of the Congress.

Months of hearings, meetings, and negotiations have given us a real chance to see meaningful pipeline safety reform legislation signed into law this year. But first, we need to get the bill to the White House.

Unfortunately, the House of Representatives is on the verge of allowing real pipeline safety reform to die this year. Despite members of our state's delegation calling for action, the House has yet to act. In the Senate, we went through the difficult process of negotiating with our colleagues and the varied interests they represent. We won some very tough concessions from the pipeline industry, and those changes will make pipelines safer throughout the country.

Some claim the Senate bill does not go far enough. I would definitely support a stronger bill, but this Congress is running out of time. To suggest now that we should delay progress because the House of Representatives has neglected this issue for nine months defies reason. I am not prepared to sacrifice the good for the perfect. The Senate legislation will force new and tougher regulations on the pipeline industry. We have a bill that can be signed into law now. The time has come for the House of Representatives to pass the Senate bill.

Some argue we could get a stronger bill next year. I wouldn't risk the safety of my family on that possibility. Next year, we won't start from where we left off. We will have to start over by educating a new Congress about the dangers of unsafe pipelines, and there would still be no guarantee that we could pass a stronger bill.

The Senate bill is not the final word on pipeline safety, but it is an effective first step that we can take today. Additional legislation in this area may be necessary in the future, and we will have to reauthorize the Office of Pipeline Safety again in three years. In addition, Congress must keep a watchful and skeptical eye over OPS and the pipeline industry. But while we consider more changes in pipeline safety, let's put the Senate bill to work for the American people. The Senate bill is our best hope – and in my opinion, our only hope - to protect communities and the public right now.