

Delta-area salt caverns could store natural gas

Project awaits state, federal OKs; salt facilities would connect to 61-mile pipeline out of Delta

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue @amyjoi16

Published: December 17, 2009 12:00 am

DELTA — An ambitious natural-gas storage project — the first of its kind in the Rocky Mountain region — is winding its way through the state and federal approval process and may be under construction as early as next spring.

An announcement by company officials Wednesday said Magnum Gas Storage has achieved a significant milestone in its plans with the acceptance of its application by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The project by the Salt Lake City-based company involves the creation of massive salt caverns on 2,050 acres of school trust lands about 10 miles north of Delta, across from the Intermountain Power Project. Each of the planned caverns for natural-gas storage would be 3,300 feet underground and measure 300 feet in diameter and 1,200 feet deep.

Magnum spokeswoman Tiffany James said the caverns will be created from a naturally occurring underground salt dome. Using a process called solution mining, Magnum engineers plan to drill into the dome and pump water in and out to dissolve the salt little by little.

"Once created, the salt caverns will have the capacity of 10 billion cubic feet of natural gas, which could supply enough energy for approximately 100,000 homes for one year," she said.

The caverns would be tied to a 61-mile pipeline that will head north out of Delta, roughly parallel to U.S. 6, and end near Goshen, where there is an interconnect transmission line for Questar and Kern River Gas.

James said the project is about two-thirds of the way through the permitting process, which requires a review of environmental impacts and mitigation plans by the company. Part of the pipeline, for example, will cross the Little Sahara recreation area.

James, an archaeologist who has worked in the natural-resource arena for years, said an aesthetic benefit of the project is that it is entirely underground.

"You see these large transmission lines marching across the countryside, but this is a little less intrusive. The surface ground is returned to its natural state," she said.

Ron Daniels, the energy policy coordinator in the Governor's Energy Advisor Office, said the project is being tracked with interest.

"They have some great goals," he said. "It makes sense to be able to store natural gas when it is not in demand and being able to sell it when there is demand."

According to the Natural Gas Supply Association, salt caverns are one of three main types of underground storage of natural gas and a method that produces a high rate of deliverability.

The caverns, once formed, allow very little of the natural gas to escape unless it is specifically extracted, and the caverns have the structural strength of steel, which makes them resistant to degradation.

Magnum's proposed gas storage facility using salt caverns would be the first "high deliverability" facility of its kind in this region, James said. Typically, salt cavern storage facilities are located along the Gulf Coast or in the northern states.

Because natural gas could flow from the caverns in as little time as an hour, James said the project enhances "on demand" need for natural gas and will free up infrastructure for renewable energy sources.

e-mail: amyjoi@desnews.com
