December 22, 2021

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: Returning to a Ban on Bulk LNG by Rail
PHMSA-2021-0058 (HM-264A)

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

The undersigned organizations write to urge the Department of Transportation to rescind the Trump-era regulation allowing the transportation of liquefied natural gas (LNG) by rail (the “LNG-by-rail rule”). The transportation of LNG by rail endangers communities and accelerates the climate crisis. Continuing to permit LNG by rail across the country would undermine the Biden Administration’s commitment to environmental justice and the dramatic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly methane.

While we are grateful for the Department’s recent proposal to suspend the LNG-by-rail rule, we remain concerned that any replacement rule may still provide for the transportation of LNG by rail in some form. To protect our communities from lethal fires and explosions and from the ravages of climate change, the LNG-by-rail rule should be rescinded; further, the transportation of bulk LNG by rail should be banned.

We wish to raise two points in this letter. First, the transportation of LNG by rail endangers communities and heats the planet. Second, the Biden Administration should rescind the LNG-by-rail rule and restore a categorical prohibition on this dangerous practice.

I. The Transportation of LNG by Rail Endangers Communities and Heats the Planet

A. LNG by Rail Endangers Communities

LNG is highly flammable and explosive—as a consequence, transporting LNG by rail can expose fence-line communities to uncontrollable fires and devastating explosions.

are hotter and burn more rapidly than fires caused by oil or gasoline.\(^3\) And once ignited, LNG fires are extremely difficult to control—emergency responders can only extinguish “very small” LNG fires.\(^4\) In most cases, LNG fires continue until they consume all the available gas—which, for a fire burning a rail car’s worth of LNG, could amount to thousands of gallons of burned gas.\(^5\)

If LNG does not immediately ignite after leaking from its container, it can pool in low-lying areas like sewers or ditches, causing fires up to 1.5 miles away from the source of release and second degree burns in people located up to 0.4 miles away from the fire.\(^6\) If not ignited, these LNG pools can warm from their liquid state into harmful, flammable vapor,\(^7\) aggregating into low-lying flammable clouds that spread even farther than the vapor clouds formed by other hydrocarbons like oil,\(^8\) which makes it more likely that a cloud composed of gas will reach an ignition source.\(^9\)

Fires involving LNG can also lead to boiling liquid expanding vapor explosions or “BLEVEs,” which occur when an LNG container such as a tank car is heated to the point of rupturing. When the pressure of the container is released, LNG can rapidly reach its boiling point and expand to gas form, which can cause a fireball, create a blast wave, and shoot shrapnel from the broken LNG container.\(^10\) A fireball created by spilled LNG can cause second degree burns in people located 0.14 miles away from the fireball.\(^11\)

LNG spills are dangerous to human health and the environment even if they do not result in fires or explosions. LNG vapor clouds can displace breathable air and asphyxiate people trapped within them.\(^12\) In addition, LNG is stored at extremely cold temperatures to keep it in a


\(^4\) Id.

\(^5\) Id.

\(^6\) NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, AND MEDICINE, PREPARING FOR LNG BY RAIL TANK CAR: A REVIEW OF A U.S. DOT SAFETY RESEARCH, TESTING, AND ANALYSIS INITIATIVE 30 (2021) (available at https://www.regulations.gov/document/PHMSA-2021-0058-0001). LNG pool fires are so intense that they are difficult to manage even in testing scenarios. An example of this can be seen in the use of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to simulate LNG pool fires during tests of portable tanks. An LNG fire would have burned 2-3 times hotter than the simulated fire. Id.

\(^7\) Id.

\(^8\) Id. at 19.

\(^9\) Id. at 28-29.


\(^11\) It is important to note that estimates of the heat flux emitted by a fireball during the Trump-era rulemaking were likely conservative. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommends that future tests employ a heat flux twice the level used during the initial tests. NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, AND MEDICINE, PREPARING FOR LNG BY RAIL TANK CAR: A REVIEW OF A U.S. DOT SAFETY RESEARCH, TESTING, AND ANALYSIS INITIATIVE 19 (2021), https://www.regulations.gov/document/PHMSA-2021-0058-0001.

\(^12\) Rail Transportation of Liquefied Natural Gas, supra note 3, at 2. Since LNG must be stored at \(-260^\circ F\), it is a cryogenic liquid with the associated safety risks. See Berkeley College of Chemistry, Section 7: Safe Handling of Cryogenic Liquids, in Health & Safety Manual, Univ. of Cal. Berkeley (2021), https://chemistry.berkeley.edu/research-safety/manual/section-7/cryogenic-liquids.
liquefied

Gas is Not an Effective Climate Strategy

The transportation of LNG by rail also raises environmental justice concerns. Communities located near potential rail routes are disproportionately environmental justice communities, and under the LNG-by-rail rule, the burden of tracking and opposing LNG transport now falls to them. Since the LNG-by-rail rule eliminates notice and comment requirements that would have otherwise accompanied every instance of LNG transportation by rail, and given the misleading marketing efforts that describe LNG as a safe and clean energy source, many communities could remain unaware of the risks posed by these trains. Moreover, environmental justice communities face additional economic and social challenges that preclude focusing time and resources investigating and opposing LNG transport by rail near their neighborhoods. As a result, these communities may be unable to protect themselves from the threat of LNG by rail absent a categorical prohibition of this activity.

B. LNG by Rail Heats Our Planet

As you are well aware, LNG is primarily composed of methane, which is the second most prevalent greenhouse gas after carbon dioxide and responsible for about half of the 1.1 degree temperature rise since the 1850s. Methane is 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a 20-year horizon and 28 times more potent over a 100-year horizon. During the production and transportation of LNG, methane is flared or vented from wells and processing facilities into the atmosphere. Overall, the greenhouse gas emissions produced from the extraction, transport, and re-gasification of LNG can be equivalent to the emissions from the burning of the gas itself.

13 Id.

14 Low-income communities of color are frequently at greatest risk of experiencing the health and safety consequences posed by train travel. See, e.g., Decrease Port, Train, and Truck Pollution, NRDC (last visited Nov. 19, 2021), https://www.nrdc.org/issues/decrease-port-train-and-truck-pollution (explaining that pollution from trains, among other modes of transport, “increase regional smog and creates toxic hot spots, particularly in low-income communities of color.”); New Study: Philly’s Minority Communities at Greatest Risk from Oil Trains, PENNENVIRONMENT (Feb. 16, 2016), https://pennenvironment.org/news/pae/new-study-philly%E2%80%99s-minority-communities-greatest-risk-oil-trains (finding that “people of color in Philadelphia are more likely to live in the possible oil train blast zone”).

15 Id.


When combined with the emissions produced from the use of LNG at its destination, as well as methane leakage during the export process, the planet heating potential of LNG is just as dangerous as the other fossil fuels LNG seeks to replace.\(^{21}\)

If fracked LNG exports increase as projected, the LNG industry alone will generate 130 to 213 million metric tons of new GHG emissions in the United States by 2030, equal to the annual emissions of 28 to 45 million fossil fuel-powered cars—enough to reverse the one percent per year decline in total U.S. GHG emissions measured during the past decade.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, permitting increased LNG production and use in the coming decades would render the Biden Administration’s goals of achieving net-zero GHG emissions by 2050 and limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius nearly impossible.\(^{23}\)

In light of the high global warming potential of methane, the Biden administration has pledged to slash methane emissions.\(^{24}\) As climate envoy John Kerry has noted, cutting methane emissions is “the single fastest strategy that we have to keep a safer, 1.5-degree Centigrade future within reach.”\(^{25}\) Closing the floodgates of LNG transportation by rail before it begins is not just important but necessary to achieve this goal.

II. The Department of Transportation Can Reverse This Trump-Era Rule Before It Takes Effect

A. Despite the Clear Harms Associated with LNG by Rail, the Trump Administration Took Steps to Expand This Activity

The shipment of LNG by rail is a relatively new practice—prior to the LNG-by-rail rule, PHMSA and the Federal Railroad Administration agreed that the shipment of LNG by rail was too dangerous to categorically approve. Instead, the transportation of LNG by rail required a PHMSA special permit or approval from the Federal Railroad Administration for the shipment of LNG in a special portable tank.\(^{26}\)

\(^{21}\) Id.

\(^{22}\) Swanson & Levin, supra note 20, at 14.


\(^{25}\) Id.

In 2019, following the Trump Administration’s mandate by Executive Order, PHMSA proposed a rule allowing for the bulk transportation of LNG by rail. In public comments, the National Transportation Safety Board—an independent federal agency charged with investigating transportation-related accidents and issuing safety recommendations to transportation agencies—concluded that the rule proposed by PHMSA “would be detrimental to public safety.” Nonetheless, PHMSA issued the final rule allowing for bulk transportation of LNG by rail.

After the LNG-by-rail rule was promulgated, twelve states and a coalition of environmental groups challenged the rule in court. The Department of Transportation recently asked the D.C. Circuit to hold this case in abeyance pending PHMSA review of the rule, and the court granted this motion.

B. The Department Now Has an Opportunity to Rescind the Rule

In early 2021, the Biden Administration issued an executive order directing the Department to review the LNG-by-rail rule. Shortly thereafter, PHMSA announced that it was suspending authorization of the LNG-by-rail rule, and that PHMSA would amend the rule after consulting with experts and reviewing new research. In November 2021, PHMSA issued notice of a proposed rulemaking to suspend the Trump-era rule until the completion of a new rulemaking to modify the LNG-by-rail rule or June 30, 2024, whichever comes first. This proposed rule acknowledges that uncertainty regarding the safety and environmental risk of LNG transport by rail has not only continued but increased since the LNG-by-rail rule was promulgated in 2019.

36 Id. at 86 Fed. Reg. 61735.
Conclusion

The transportation of LNG by rail is disastrous for the health and safety of fence-line communities, especially environmental justice communities. The transportation of LNG by rail also escalates the climate crisis. We respectfully urge the Department and PHMSA to conclude their evaluation of an alternative LNG-by-rail rule by permanently rescinding the Trump-era LNG-by-rail rule and categorically banning the bulk transport of LNG by rail. The safety of our communities and the future of our planet demand it.

Sincerely,

Susan Penner
Liaison, Legislative Working Group
1000 Grandmothers for Future Generations

Drew Hudson
Founder
198 Methods

Micah Walker Parkin
Executive Director
350 Colorado

Patricia Hine
President
350 Eugene

Carolyn C. Barthel
Executive Committee Member
350 Mass

Renate Heurich
Co-Founder
350 New Orleans

Selden Prentice
Federal Policy Lead
350 Seattle

David Perk
Leadership Team
350 Seattle

Daniel Villa
Volunteer
350 Tacoma

Jackie Weisberg
Action Together Gloucester County Chair
350 Brooklyn

Jeanne Jordan
Action Together New Jersey

Sarah Stewart
President
Animals Are Sentient Beings, Inc.

Marcia Lehman
Executive Board Member, Treasurer
Beaver County Marcellus Awareness Community (BCMAC)

Karen Feridun
Founder
Berks Gas Truth
Mark Hefflinger  
Communications and Digital Director  
Bold Alliance

Edil Sepulveda  
Co-Founder and Spokesperson  
Boricuas Unidos en la Diáspora (BUDPR)

Rebecca Roter  
Chairperson  
Breathe Easy Susquehanna County

Sharon Furlong  
Spokesperson  
Bucks Environmental Action

Wes Gillingham  
Associate Director  
Catskill Mountainkeeper

Sid Madison  
Member  
Central Jersey Coalition Against Endless War

Linda R. Powell  
Outreach Coordinator  
Central Jersey Environmental Defenders

Amelia Hummel  
Member  
Citizens Acting for Rail Safety - Twin Cities

Joe Minott  
Executive Director and Chief Counsel  
Clean Air Council

Eric Benson  
NJ Campaigns Director  
Clean Water Action

Esteban Arenas-Pino  
Policy Associate  
Climate Justice Alliance

Ken Dolsky  
Organizer  
Coalition Against Pilgrim Pipeline - NJ

Hayley Rhiannon Jones  
VT and NJ State Director  
Community Action Works

B. Arrindell  
Director  
Damascus Citizens for Sustainability

Tracy Carluccio  
Deputy Director  
Delaware Riverkeeper Network

Ken Dolsky  
Co-Leader  
Don’t Gas the Meadowlands Coalition

Mary F. Gutierrez  
Director  
Earth Action, Inc.

Federico Cintron Moscoso  
Program Director  
El Puente

John Rumpler  
Senior Director, Clean Water for America  
Campaign and Senior Attorney  
Environment America

Alison L. Steele  
Executive Director  
Environmental Health Project
Sarah Randolph  
Chair  
Escambia County Democratic  
Environmental Caucus of Florida

Eva Welchman  
Artistic Director  
Eva Dean Dance

Adam Carlesco  
Staff Attorney  
Food & Water Watch

Julia Walsh  
Director  
Frack Action

Shannon Smith  
Interim Executive Director  
FracTracker Alliance

Leatra J. Harper  
Managing Director  
FreshWater Accountability Project

Marcie Keever  
Oceans and Vessels Program Director  
Friends of the Earth

Zorka Milin  
Senior Advisor  
Global Witness

Fletcher Harper  
Executive Director  
GreenFaith

Andrea Marpillero-Colomina  
Clean Transportation + Energy Lead  
GreenLatinos

Naomi Yoder  
Staff Scientist  
Healthy Gulf

Dr. F. Taylor  
Coordinator  
Hilton Head for Peace

Linda Hood  
Team Leader, Indivisible Tacoma  
Legislative Action Team  
Indivisible Tacoma

Ann Pinca  
President  
Lebanon Pipeline Awareness

John Weisheit  
Conservation Director  
Living Rivers & Colorado Riverkeeper

Cheryl Nenn  
Riverkeeper  
Milwaukee Riverkeeper

Hunter Lovins  
President  
Natural Capitalism Solutions

Sahana Rao  
Project Attorney  
Natural Resources Defense Council

Silvia Solaun  
Executive Director & Founder  
New Jersey Forest Watch

Carol Gay  
President  
NJ State Industrial Union Council
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Jill McManus</td>
<td>Event Coordinator</td>
<td>NYC Grassroots Alliance</td>
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<td>Member</td>
<td>Occupy Bergen County</td>
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<td>Courtney Vail</td>
<td>Campaign Director</td>
<td>Oceanic Preservation Society</td>
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<td>Lorne Stockman</td>
<td>Research Director</td>
<td>Oil Change International</td>
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<td>Jim Black</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Partnership for Sustainability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fermin Morales</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Philly Boricuas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tammy Murphy</td>
<td>Medical Advocacy Director</td>
<td>Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dianna Cohen</td>
<td>CEO and Co-Founder</td>
<td>Plastic Pollution Coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donna Pitt</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Preserve Giles County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catherine Hunt</td>
<td>Coordinator, NJ Chapter</td>
<td>Progressive Democrats of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbara Jarmoska</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Project CoffeeHouse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diana G. Dakey</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Protect Northern PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sean Dixon</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Puget Soundkeeper Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glenn Olcerst</td>
<td>Co-Founder &amp; General Counsel</td>
<td>Rail Pollution Protection Pittsburgh (RP3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ron Kaminkow</td>
<td>General Secretary</td>
<td>Railroad Workers United</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill Schultz</td>
<td>Riverkeeper</td>
<td>Raritan Riverkeeper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Lichty</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Resolution Media Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Cross</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Responsible Drilling Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim Ross</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>ReThink Energy Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim A. Fraczek</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Sane Energy Project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sharon Osika-Michales
Core Member
Shaleshock CNY

Grace Nichols
Solidarity Coordinator
Save the Pine Bush

Ann S. Horan
Member
Shaleshock CNY

Sharon Osika-Michales
Core Member
Shaleshock CNY

Charles Varni
STOP Climate Change Campaign Coordinator
SLO Surfrider Chapter

Bill Moyer
Executive Director
Solutionary Rail

Jennifer Nielsen
Co-Chair Climate Committee
SOMA Action

Stanley Petrowski
President/Director
South Umpqua Rural Community Partnership

Matt Krogh
U.S. Oil & Gas Campaign Director
Stand.earth

Linda Reik
Board of Directors, Member
Sullivan Alliance for Sustainable Development

Jean Tepperman
Co-Coordinator
Sunflower Alliance

Matt Gove
Mid-Atlantic Policy Manager
Surfrider Foundation

Yangbo Du
Managing Director
Sustainable Development Investment Finance Partnership of New York

David Whiteside
Executive Director
Tennessee Riverkeeper

Robin Schneider
Executive Director
Texas Campaign for the Environment

Jackie Nuñez
Founder
The Last Plastic Straw

Joanie Steinhaus
Gulf Program Director
Turtle Island Restoration Network

Daniel E. Estrin
General Counsel and Advocacy Director
Waterkeeper Alliance
Caleb Merendino  
Co-Executive Director  
Waterway Advocates

Emily Keel  
Steering Committee Member  
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom of the Triangle, NC