Puerto Rico Ponders Alternatives to Gas Pipeline

DANICA COTO,Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — A proposed natural gas pipeline that is backed by Puerto Rico's governor but widely opposed by islanders and environmentalists could be cast aside in favor of new alternatives after millions of dollars were invested in the massive project.

Members of a committee appointed by Gov. Luis Fortuno to find alternative energy sources said in a statement late Friday that they have rejected part of the original proposal calling for a pipeline to bisect Puerto Rico. The committee offered three alternatives to move natural gas from storage facilities on the island's south coast to plants in the north in a push to minimize the U.S. territory's dependence on oil.

Puerto Rico relies on petroleum to generate nearly 70 percent of its power, and electric bills are at least twice as expensive on average compared with those on the U.S. mainland. Fortuno originally envisioned a 92-mile (148-kilometer) pipeline he said would save $1 billion a year and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 64 percent.

Critics said the pipeline would destroy some of the island's most fragile ecosystems and expose people living nearby to potentially deadly explosions.

"The committee reached one conclusion: that natural gas is the only way Puerto Rico will be able to meet new federal emission standards in a timely and cost-effective manner," committee director Pedro Nieves said in a phone interview.

Nieves described the committee's alternatives, including one to place a buoy in waters just north of the island that would carry natural gas to facilities of the state-owned power authority. A second alternative calls for construction of a floating terminal near the island's south coast facilities that could be used by boats to distribute gas to a satellite terminal in the north. The third alternative is to supply compressed natural gas through a northern terminal built either on land or underwater.

Juan Camacho, spokesman for a local group that opposes the original project, said he worries that building a smaller pipeline along the north coast is still a possibility, and said he favors the water-based alternatives. "For us, it is unacceptable that even one inch of a natural gas pipeline be built," he said.

Fortuno said in a statement that he will consult several federal agencies before choosing a project that is affordable, safe and meets new federal emission standards as well as guarantees cheaper electricity bills.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has final say on the original proposal, said the government has not asked that the project be suspended.

"We are still continuing evaluation of the permit," spokeswoman Nancy Sticht said. "No decision has been made yet."

So far, the government has spent more than $30 million on the original proposal in studies and other costs, Jose Ortiz, a member of the committee and state power company official, said this week. Of that money, up to $12 million would be lost if the governor chose another alternative, he said.

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