

# Vote expected on hotly contested New Jersey pipeline project

February 24 2017, by Wayne Parry

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This Jan. 6, 2014, file photo shows a section of the Pinelands region in Lakehurst N.J. New Jersey regulators are set to vote Friday, Feb. 24, 2017, on whether a natural gas pipeline should run through the state's federally protected Pinelands preserve. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry, File)

New Jersey regulators are set to vote on whether a natural gas pipeline should run through the state's federally protected Pinelands region, which includes more than a million acres of farms, forests and wetlands.

The Pinelands Commission is expected to make a final determination Friday morning on the proposal that has touched off a classic jobs-versus-

environment battle in the nation's most densely populated state.

Supporters say it will increase energy reliability, while environmentalists fear damage to the pristine Pinelands region.

The plan was narrowly defeated in 2014. But since then, Republican Gov. Chris Christie has replaced several Pinelands commissioners with supporters of the pipeline.

With a new Republican administration in power in Washington that is more receptive to fossil-fuel energy projects, the fate of the Pinelands pipeline is being closely watched by national energy and environmental groups.

South Jersey Gas wants to run the pipeline mostly under or alongside existing roads from Maurice River Township in Cumberland County to the B.L. England power plant in Upper Township.

The company says it already operates over 1,400 miles of gas mains and 133 miles of elevated pressure lines within the Pinelands without harming the environment.

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After the proposal was defeated in 2014, the executive director of the Pinelands Commission unilaterally decided that it met the agency's criteria and was therefore approved. Environmentalists sued, and a court ordered the commission to take a new vote.

Environmental groups fear the pipeline will harm the fragile Pinelands and set a bad precedent for future development. They say it will cause a loss of some habitat and increase runoff and erosion in an area that is home to an aquifer that is estimated to hold 17 trillion gallons of some of the nation's purest water.

Four former state governors—two Republicans and two Democrats—also have opposed the pipeline, citing their desire to protect a vulnerable natural resource.

South Jersey Gas maintains that in addition to providing a cleaner fuel source to the power plant, the new pipeline would provide a second transmission vehicle for natural gas to thousands of customers in Atlantic and Cape May counties. Currently, there is only one pipeline that takes gas to nearly 29,000 homes and businesses, which could be left out in the cold without a second way of getting gas to their homes if the existing [pipeline](#) fails.

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