**Pipeline expert says couplings dangerous, calls for removal**

**WFAA Staff, WFAA.com***2:50 p.m. CDT August 11, 2010*

**CONNECT**[**TWEET**](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A//www.wfaa.com/story/news/local/2014/08/07/13527030/&text=Pipeline%20expert%20says%20couplings%20dangerous%2C%20calls%20for%20removal&via=wfaachannel8)[**LINKEDIN**](http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?url=http%3A//www.wfaa.com/story/news/local/2014/08/07/13527030/&mini=true)**COMMENTEMAILMORE**

**POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS**

A pipeline safety expert is calling for state regulators to order the removal of more potentially deadly natural gas couplings throughout Texas.

The warning from Don Deaver, a pipeline safety engineer from Lake Conroe, follows last spring's near-fatal house explosion in Irving. Deaver said the Irving blast could have been prevented and called the couplings a continuous endangerment if action isn't taken.

A News 8 investigation into faulty natural gas couplings began two years ago. At the time, the Texas Railroad Commission acted swiftly by ordering the removal of tens of thousands of faulty couplings attached to residential gas meters. But Deaver said the Irving explosion represents another, more pervasive threat.

Just days after the explosion last May, with severe burns to his face and hands, homeowner Brad Luttrell waged a touch-and-go battle with death and was still uncertain as to why he was suddenly scarred for life.

WFAA-TV

Brad Luttrell endured severe burns in a May explosion at an Irving home.

Investigators and engineers ultimately discovered three gas leaks within two blocks. One of the leaks was under the street in front of Luttrell's house, where a Normac brand compression coupling was leaking so badly it was described by a Texas Railroad Commission investigator as audible and blowing.

It is a specific style of coupling that some say state regulators, as well as Atmos Energy, should have known had a legacy of failure.

They have warnings about these being prone to leakage, Deaver said. If they are not anchored, there will be loss of life and serious injury because of these couplings. They are not designed for the use on natural gas pipelines.

Deaver said the entire natural gas industry knows about the compression coupling's potential to fail.

Two years ago, following the deaths of Benny and Martha Cryer in an explosion in Wylie, Deaver demonstrated to News 8 the ease in which a pipe can slip out of the compression coupling fitting.

Not long after his demonstration, there was another gas explosion. The 2007 explosion that killed Hazel Pawlick and her daughter occurred in Cleburne. Deaver helped investigate the cause. Again, a faulty Normac compression coupling was found under the street. The rubber seal had worn out.

It was a problem that first surfaced back in the 1970s, when Lone Star Gas Company owned and operated what is now the Atmos system. Technicians back then were critical of the Normac compression couplings and reported of elasticity being lost from the rubber gaskets where it was holding the pipes together.

Another worker complained in another report that the rubber gaskets contract after being in service. He called the failures a frequent occurrence on couplings that have been in service for a number of years.

The problems weren't limited to Texas. Compression couplings of all styles were failing all over the United States dating back to the mid-1970s. Failures occurred in Nebraska, Arizona, Kansas, Missouri, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Minnesota and New York. Minnesota ordered 32,000 couplings removed from the ground. New York authorities called for the removal of 45,000 compression couplings. Maryland officials ordered 30,000 removed.

In Texas, where there are nearly three million compression couplings still in use, only those that are found leaking are being removed.

In our viewpoint, we would disagree that there is an inherent flaw in the coupling, said John Tintera, executive director of the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the oil and gas industry in Texas.

He said only a fraction of the couplings have ever failed. However, he admitted he has never read the numerous field reports that were critical of the coupling in the 70s.

Still, Tintera said the commission is well aware of the potential danger, and is acting on it.

The safety concerns, and the safety actions of the Railroad Commission, continue to be of paramount importance and we've taken actions to take those steps, he said.

Tintera said in addition to ordering the removal of compression couplings at residential gas meters, the Railroad Commission has asked Atmos Energy to step up its leak detection efforts. He said most of the compression couplings still in the ground will remain there.

We feel the best technological solution is having increased vigilance through leak detection surveys, repairs and reporting, he said.

Since October 2006, there have been four deaths and five serious injuries resulting from four house explosions, all involving compression couplings that were defective or had worn out. Deaver said the executive director and the three Railroad Commissioners need to wake up and smell the danger.

Well, it's four times over what you need to know to take decisive action and it's not going to get better with time, he said. It's going to get worse.

All three of the Railroad Commissioners declined to be interviewed. Atmos Energy has repeatedly refused to comment on the coupling issue.

Atmos is working with the Railroad Commission to beef up its leak detection with new equipment and personnel. Atmos will spend $2 million enhancing their risk identification system.

But at this time, there are no plans to remove the couplings that have been called a ticking time bomb.