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New NARUC Primer Prepares Commissions to Manage Artificial Intelligence Investments for Natural Gas Delivery

WASHINGTON (November 5, 2020) — A new educational primer published by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners aims to improve awareness of artificial intelligence tools and practices among public utility commissions and highlights the potential of AI to enhance natural gas utility performance.

“The Department of Energy’s investments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) research and development have helped unlock new opportunities for AI across the energy sector,” said Shawn Bennett, the Department’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oil and Natural Gas. “We welcome this new primer to communicate the ways in which AI can deliver value to natural gas utilities and customers.”

Artificial Intelligence for Natural Gas Utilities: A Primer begins by offering definitions for AI and other relevant terms. The primer cites three challenges common to natural gas distribution utilities: aging infrastructure replacement, excavator damage to underground infrastructure and customer participation in energy efficiency programs. Also highlighted are case studies where utilities have effectively used AI solutions. It also includes an overview of challenges to AI implementation and offers opportunities for future AI deployment. Produced under the U.S. Department of Energy-NARUC Natural Gas Partnership, the primer aligns with the partnership’s objective to build commissions’ knowledge of emerging natural gas technologies. The primer does not seek to endorse AI over other solutions, nor does it endorse any particular company or approach.

“There are many documented examples of AI deployment by electric utilities, but comparatively few resources examining the potential of AI for natural gas utilities,” said NARUC Center for Partnerships & Innovation Director Danielle Sass Byrnett. “This primer leverages real-world experience implementing AI for natural gas infrastructure replacement, damage prevention and efficiency programs, answering questions commissions might encounter when considering utility proposals for AI investments.”

“Aging infrastructure and excavation damage lead to real costs for natural gas utilities and their customers,” said Commissioner D. Ethan Kimbrel of the Illinois Commerce Commission, one of the authors of the primer. “Using AI to predict infrastructure problems before they happen can help natural gas utilities allocate scarce resources more effectively across vast delivery systems. Further, the use of AI to improve natural gas efficiency programs can deliver additional energy and cost savings to natural gas customers.”

“Public utility commissions are responsible for ensuring that utilities are making the best possible investment decisions on behalf of their customers,” said Commissioner Diane X. Burman of the New York State Public Service Commission, who chairs NARUC’s Committee on Gas and the NGP. “This primer lays the groundwork for productive collaboration among regulators, utilities and other stakeholders to understand opportunities for AI to enhance the safety, reliability, resilience, affordability and environmental stewardship of our natural gas infrastructure.”

The report, developed under the NGP, was authored by Burman, Kimbrel, Commissioner Tricia Pridemore of the Georgia Public Service Commission, Andreas Thanos of the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, and NARUC Senior Manager Kiera Zitelman.

To read the report, go to <http://bit.ly/AlGasPrimer>.

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NARUC is a non-profit organization founded in 1889 whose members include the governmental agencies that are engaged in the regulation of utilities and carriers in the fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. NARUC's member agencies regulate telecommunications, energy, and water utilities. NARUC represents the interests of state public utility commissions before the three branches of the federal government. www.naruc.org