A DOE / National Petroleum Council study tasked with identifying ways to improve disaster recovery related communication between the oil and gas industry and government, is providing an opportunity to get expedited DOE assistance in clearing critical mutual assistance roadblocks identified in this year’s first National Mutual Assistance Mock Drill.

Media attention and potential civil unrest associated with the reestablishment of electric service and the unavailability of motor vehicle fuel in the aftermath of Super Storm Sandy, resulted in President Obama reaching out directly to CEO’s of the impacted electric utilities for answers on their recovery efforts and restoration plans. Because the supply chain structure for motor vehicle fuels differs so much from that of a regulated utility, the administration was unable to identify single points of contact to get the answers it was seeking when it came to gasoline and diesel fuels. The DOE/NPC study has it’s genesis in the administration’s frustration following Sandy and it’s desire to have access to answers on motor vehicle fuels following the next natural disaster. While this motor vehicle fuels issue isn’t a natural gas issue; the study, because it does focus on the oil and gas industry, is providing an opportunity for the natural gas mutual aid message to be shared.

Natural Gas Industry representatives participated in a stakeholder input session hosted by the NPC April 30 in Washington and communicated effectively that natural gas utilities have:

1. Effective relationships with local and state governments, as a result of the state regulatory model and community outreach efforts.
2. Regional mutual assistance groups and agreements like the one overseen by the SGA Distribution Operations and Engineering Section Committee.
3. Single point of contact CEO’s or presidents who could interface directly with the administration if that level of communication is required regarding restoration of natural gas service following a natural disaster.

Industry representatives also highlighted the National Mutual Assistance Mock Drill, planned and led by SGA member companies, and its key lessons learned. The drill identified two major roadblocks to expediting mutual assistance recovery:

1. The difficulty in moving large vehicles and equipment across state lines and the Canadian border, because of weight limits and licensing requirements.
2. The challenges presented by the state level oversight and approval of Operator Qualifications and the fact that those approvals are not portable across state lines or the Canadian border.
Both issues can be surmounted with the issuance of waivers from DOT/PHMSA, but the current waiver process is cumbersome, undefined and needs to be supplemented with communication from the waiver granting agency to state governments to be most effective. DOE is anxious to demonstrate progress is being made prior to the release of the study and committed to stakeholders in attendance that they would begin work on expediting the waiver process immediately with the goal of having improvements in place for this hurricane season. This promised work began with a follow up session for federal agencies hosted by DOE on May 1. Additional information on the progress being made will be provided as it becomes available.

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