

Booklet for kids a flashpoint in climate change debate

By KALE WILLIAMS
The Oregonian

The title seems benign enough: “My Nat and Gus Natural Gas Activity Booklet.”

The cover of the book shows a happy cat and mouse riding a school bus powered by natural gas, a glowing blue flame emblazoned on the front.

The booklet, and others like it that NW Natural has offered to schools in Oregon, have become a political flashpoint in a larger challenge to the utility’s most recent proposal to raise rates on the roughly 700,000 Oregonians who use its methane. The proposal calls for a roughly 10% increase, which would be the second double-digit hike in less than a year if approved by the Oregon Public Utilities Commission.

Jaimini Parekh, an EarthJustice lawyer representing a coalition of environmental groups objecting to the Oregon rate hike, said the booklets ignore climate change implications of methane emissions, which largely come from natural gas systems.

On top of that, opponents say, NW Natural is proposing that their customers pay for the booklets — a relatively tiny line item in the utility’s budget but an overarching issue in the debate about the future of natural gas.

In written testimony filed earlier this month, Cory Beck, a senior communications manager for the utility, defended NW Natural’s use of the materials.

“The information presented in the school materials is not being used to promote or publicize a cause or point of view,” Beck wrote. “The purpose of the materials is to educate about natural gas safety in conformance with federal law.”

The “Nat and Gus” activity book does contain some safety information, instructing children how to detect and react to a gas leak. The rest of the book focuses on how natural gas is made and its different uses in homes and businesses.

“Nat and Gus” was among a series of activities booklets offered to nearly every grade school in northwestern Oregon but sent only to schools that requested them, NW Natural said. It’s not clear how many districts took up the utility’s offer because a spokesperson wouldn’t say which schools received the materials for the 2021-2022 school year.

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, last year, some parents who discovered similar materials took their concerns to the school district, which quickly pulled a booklet called “Natural Gas: Your Invisible Friend” from classrooms. The school district superintendent said the booklets were distributed “in error.” NW Natural also offered the “Invisible Friend” booklet last year but did not for the 2021-2022 school year.

Parekh argues the materials fall far outside the sort of advertising for which NW Natural can legitimately recover its costs.

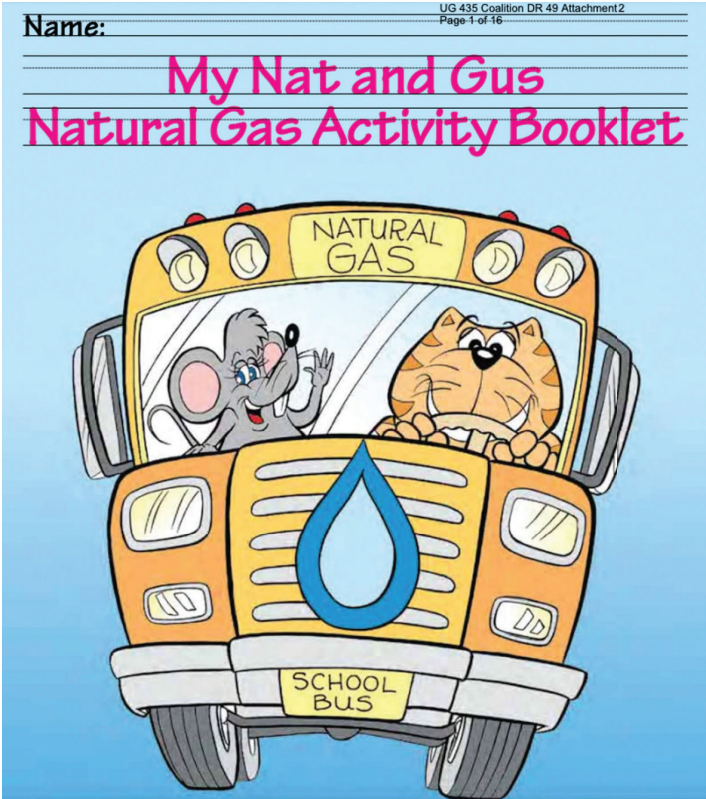
“The idea is you want to inform people if there is a pipeline in their backyard so they don’t destroy it,” Parekh said. “These children’s books don’t talk about the pipeline distribution system at all.”

NW Natural’s use of the booklets was first reported by the climate change publication, Desmog.

The Public Utilities Commission is expected to reach a decision on the rate hike by November.

Coalition intervenes

NW Natural first filed its proposal for a 10% rate increase in December. The increase would add an addi-



A booklet distributed to some Oregon schools by NW Natural has drawn criticism from environmental advocates.

tional \$73.5 million in yearly revenue. The utility took in about \$860 million in revenue in 2021.

The hike, which would come on the heels of a 13% increase in November, is necessary “to sustain the provision of safe, reliable, and low-cost natural gas service to customers in Oregon, while preserving the company’s ability to attract capital for future investments,” NW Natural wrote in its initial proposal.

NW Natural included roughly \$3 million in advertising costs it was hoping to recoup from ratepayers, with just under \$70,000 allocated for the children’s booklets. Earlier this month, the utility reached a limited settlement with the coalition to reduce the total amount of recoverable advertising costs by \$1 million.

About a month after the filing, a coalition of environmental groups — including Climate Solutions, Verde and Columbia Riverkeeper — intervened in the case.

While carbon dioxide gets more attention as a climate warming gas, methane is far more potent, with as much as 25 times the potential for trapping heat in the atmosphere. While methane persists for far less time in the atmosphere, concentrations of the gas have more than doubled over the past 20 years, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, comprising about 11% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2020.

In its proposal to raise rates, the utility categorized the children’s workbooks as material promoting safety, Parekh said. The category allows for the utility to recoup its costs from ratepayers.

David Roy, a spokesperson for NW Natural, noted that many other utilities, including Portland General Electric, use similar booklets for schoolchildren to teach about safety.

Roy said NW Natural is required by federal law “to establish continuing education programs to enable the

public, appropriate government organizations, and persons engaged in excavation-related activities to recognize a pipeline emergency and to report it to the operator and/or the police, or other appropriate public officials.”

“The affected public includes not only customers, but also anyone who might come into contact with the natural gas system,” Roy said. “Schools within the NW Natural service territory are part of the affected public stakeholder audience category.”

For the environmental groups, the content of the booklets is just as important as their expense. They argue instead of promoting safety, they downplay the risks of methane.

‘Targeting the next generation of greenwashing’

In one activity from the “Nat and Gus” book, which is geared toward children between kindergarten and second grade, students are asked to look at a set of pictures and determine which people are using natural gas.

One of the pictures shows a chef pulling a pizza out of a hot oven, another shows workers making baseball bats. The next page shows a jar of cookies next to a stove and a puzzle activity tells kids not to play near gas appliances.

Parekh said the intent of that exercise, and similar ones throughout the booklet, is to form connections within a student’s mind between natural gas and things they like, like pizza, cookies and baseball. The booklets fail to mention the downsides of methane use, Parekh said.

Melanie Plaut, a retired obstetrician-gynecologist and member of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, said natural gas presents a number of health risks, especially for babies and children. Those arise from the ways it’s extracted, often through hydraulic fracking, to the ways it’s used in the home.

A study published earlier this year in the Journal of the American Medical Association looked at about 35,000 pregnancies among those living within about 6 miles of a fracking site, where liquid is injected into the Earth at high pressures to force open fissures to extract methane. The results found that the risk of babies being born “small for gestational age and (with) major congenital anomalies” was “significantly higher” for those who lived close to at least one fracking site.

Roy said NW Natural sources its methane from the Colorado and Canadian Rockies, “two areas with some of the most stringent oil and gas regulations.”

“Gas development must be done right – and that means with all the necessary environmental protections,” he said in an email. “If new studies by the scientific and regulatory community indicate more regulation is needed to protect the environment, we are 100% supportive.”

The risks continue after the gas makes its way into homes, Plaut said. When natural gas is burned — in stoves, furnaces or water heaters — it produces nitrogen dioxide, which numerous studies have linked to an increased risk of childhood asthma, increased susceptibility to lung infections and learning deficits.

Plaut noted that children are at a higher risk for respiratory health impacts because they have smaller lungs, faster breathing rates and a higher ratio of lung surface to body weight.

“It’s especially bad for kids, which is why the targeting of the next generation for greenwashing is particularly egregious,” she said.

Owner to sell Petersen Rock Garden near Bend

By JOE SIESS
The Bulletin

Susan Caward spent most of her life living on her family’s property near Redmond where her grandfather, a Danish immigrant named Rasmus Petersen, turned a love of rocks and his own labor into a roadside attraction known around the world.

The Petersen Rock Garden is known for the numerous rock structures Petersen built with his own two hands in the 1930s and ‘40s. They have a weathered look to them and the landscaping today is rough around the edges, but the displays still inspire visitors. There are small rock structures, stone paths, a bridge decorated with rocks, a grotto, ponds and a small replica of the Statue of Liberty.

And peacocks that roam the property unrestricted.

But time has caught up with the 57-year-old Caward, who suffered a serious back injury in her 20s and now struggles to care for her grandfather’s creations. Caward gets around with a walking stick and has trouble walking or standing for long periods of time. Sometimes, her legs go numb. It’s all a sign, she said, that it is time for her to retire.

So Caward is working with her real estate agent to sell the property, which is listed for \$825,000. In addition to all the art and rocks, the price also includes the peacocks.

Stewardship key for owner

She doesn’t want to sell the property to just anybody. Her hope is to find a suitable buyer who will maintain her grandfather’s creations.

“I just want to kind of retire, come here every once in a while and see what the new people are doing with it,” Caward said.

Caward said she wants to be clear that she is not retiring because she is no longer interested in the rock garden. The rock garden and the surrounding property is her home and very important to her, she said, but because of her declining health, she simply is unable to continue doing what it takes to maintain the rock garden.

“It’s not that I don’t want to do it. It’s just that my body can’t do it,” Caward said. “My doctor has been cautioning me, ‘You’ve got to retire.’”

Caward sat at a picnic table amid



A rock sculpture in a pond at the Petersen Rock Garden.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

enchanted stone structures, as peacocks shrieked, cats pranced and her dog “Hellboy” sniffed around, and told the story of how she broke her back.

Caward broke her back in three places after a ram living on the family farm attacked her. If it were not for her dog “Sheba” — an English herder and blue heeler mix — Caward is convinced she would be dead.

It all started when she was feeding the animals on the farm and turned her back on one of the rams.

“Next thing I know, I went flying through the air, landed on the rock wall, rolled down off the rock wall, and started crawling away and had a feeling I should look behind me,” Caward recalled. “And I look around behind me and the sheep is on top of the wall coming down on top of me head first, and I just thought, ‘I am dead, dead, dead, dead.’”

At this point, Caward curled up in a ball on the ground with the expectation that she would be killed by the animal, but then Sheba vaulted off her back and took the ram down and hung onto its nose until Caward could escape.

As a young woman working on a farm every day, she quickly forgot the back injury and went on with her life.

It wasn’t until a decade later that her doctor discovered she had actually broken her back, and gave her a choice between back surgery and eventually winding up in

a wheelchair, she said. Caward chose surgery, which kept her back injury at bay for a good 19 years, she said.

A love for the visitors

She said she loves the people who come to visit the rock garden. She loves talking to people, but she envisions living on a piece of land with some friends where she could perhaps raise animals, sleep in, and enjoy her later years.

“Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think,” Caward said, invoking the inscription on the Statue of Liberty rock structure her grandfather made.

Kaisha Brannon, the real estate agent helping Caward sell the property, has a personal connection with the rock garden and wants to see it go to the right buyers.

Brannon said her grandparents and parents visited the rock garden, and growing up, it was a special place she would go see as a kid. Now, her own children are exploring the garden while she shows the place to prospective buyers.

“I was super excited when I got the phone call, because I do know the Petersen Rock Garden really well, and I do know how important it is to the community and to central Oregon, so ultimately this is very dear to my heart,” she said. “It’s not necessarily about the real estate transaction for me. It’s very much about helping Susan and finding the right person that is going to be the new person that takes care

of the property.”

While there is no way to know what the future owners will do with the property once they buy it, Brannon said she is doing her best to vet buyers to ensure the rock garden winds up in the right hands.

Brannon added that the rock garden is open to the public during the selling process, and Caward hopes people will still come visit at this time.

‘A community memory’

Kelly Cannon-Miller, the executive director of the Deschutes County Historical Society, said the historical society stands ready to provide research and background to whoever ends up buying the beloved rock garden.

“I hope the person who buys it is ready to take it on and loves it the way people have loved it over the years,” Cannon-Miller said. “It definitely has a community memory attached to it. Folks who grew up going there want to go back and see it and remember family visits.”

Cannon-Miller explained that back in its heyday, the Petersen Rock Garden accommodated thousands of tourists in a given year driving up and down U.S. Highway 97, which back then was mainly referred to as The Dalles-California Highway.

At the time, during the 1940s and ‘50s, visitors could visit the rock garden’s museum, which still stands today, and could take a swan boat ride on the pond or grab a bite in the diner in addition to exploring the rock garden. Having lunch and contemplating life outside on the lawn surrounded by peacocks and Petersen’s art was a popular pastime for visitors, Cannon-Miller said.

“Between 1935 and 1952, Rasmus was always still building and changing it, so it had that changing attraction element to it as well,” Cannon-Miller said of the rock garden.

Petersen’s art was influenced by both his childhood growing up in Denmark, combined with his experience homesteading and farming in Oregon, a combination complimented by his irreverent sense of humor and his contemplation of nature, Cannon-Miller added.

Petersen died of a heart attack inside the museum on the property in 1952 at the age of 69 and is buried in Redmond Memorial Cemetery.