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Utility: ATVs damaging pipeline routes in Erie region

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So much fun, it must be illegal.

That's the headline of a National Fuel advertisement cautioning recreational riders to stay away from natural gas pipelines buried throughout the region.

The drivers of all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, cars and even trucks are traveling along pipeline rights of way in some areas and have knocked down pipeline markers, cut through locks and gates, and damaged private property, National Fuel spokeswoman Sandra James said.

"Vehicles also are ripping up the grass, which increases the potential for erosion, or the covering over the pipeline being washed away," James said. "And that threatens the integrity of the high-pressure transmission line itself."

National Fuel distributes gas through more than 6,000 miles of pipeline in Pennsylvania and New York. Most of the lines

are 3 to 4 feet below ground, depending on the terrain.

One of those pipelines crosses mostly wooded property on Henderson Road, in the Belle Valley area of Millcreek Township. Karl and Sally Ebert inherited the 57 acres from family. Other family members own property nearby.

The pipeline right of way on their properties is being used as a highway, mostly by four-wheelers and other ATVs, Karl Ebert said. Gates meant to keep the vehicles out of the right of way have had locks cut off, been torched and torn down, most recently this spring. Pipeline markers have been knocked down and removed, he said.

Elsewhere on the property, riders have cut trees down to clear paths for vehicles, Ebert said.

"We've had all kind of damage to our property, including the National Fuel right of way. A couple different hillsides are eroding because of traffic from four-wheelers and ATVs," he said.

Riders encroaching on private property, including a pipeline right of way, can be charged with trespass by motor vehicle criminal trespass and criminal mischief, the latter ranging from a summary violation to a felony depending on circumstances including the extent of the property damage, Millcreek Township police Capt. Carter Mook said.

National Fuel will press charges against trespassers to recoup the cost of damages, and to save customers from paying a tab, James said.

"If a rider damages the right of way and is caught, he will be held responsible for restoration costs, including things like repair, topsoil replacement, manpower and equipment costs, and reseeding," James said.

The rights of way can be dangerous to more than riders' pocketbooks.

"There are also valves above ground in some areas that have been hit and damaged by riders. If a vehicle hits that at any speed, riders could be hurt by them," James said.

While pipeline routes can seem like attractive pathways through fields and woods, they were created for the placement, safe operation and maintenance of natural gas transmission lines, James said.

"They go through private property and are not intended for recreational purposes. Driving on them is illegal, and dangerous," she said.

National Fuel officials ask anyone who spots a vehicle on a pipeline right of way to call police or the company's security

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A gate meant to keep vehicles off a National Fuel pipeline right of way off Henderson Road in Millcreek Township was broken this spring. ATVs and other vehicles regularly travel the right of way, property owners said. CONTRIBUTED//ERIE TIMES-NEWS

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