Bringing Alaska North Slope Natural Gas to Market

At least three alternatives have been proposed over the years for bringing sizable volumes of natural gas from Alaska's remote North Slope to market in the lower 48 States: a pipeline interconnecting with the existing pipeline system in central Alberta, Canada; a gas-to-liquids (GTL) plant on the North Slope; and a large liquefied natural gas (LNG) export facility at Valdez, Alaska. NEMS explicitly models the pipeline and GTL options [*66*]. The "what if" LNG option is not modeled in NEMS.

This comparison analyzes the economics of the three project options, based on the oil and natural gas price projections in the *AEO2009* reference, high oil price, and low oil price cases. The most important factors in the comparison include expected construction lead times, capital costs, and operating costs. Others include lower 48 natural gas prices, world crude oil and petroleum product prices, interest rates, and Federal and State regulation of leasing, royalty, and production tax rates. Each option also presents unique technological challenges.

Natural Gas Resources and Production Costs

Natural gas exists either in oil reservoirs as associated-dissolved (AD) natural gas or in gas-only reservoirs as nonassociated (NA) natural gas. Of the 35.4 trillion cubic feet of AD gas reserves discovered on the Central North Slope in conjunction with existing oil fields, 93 percent is located in four fields: Prudhoe Bay (23 trillion cubic feet), Point Thomson (8 trillion cubic feet), Lisburne (1 trillion cubic feet), and Kuparak (1 trillion cubic feet) [*67*]. Together, those resources (a total of 35.4 trillion cubic feet of AD natural gas reserves) are sufficient to provide 4 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day for a period of 24 years, at an expected average cost of $1.21 per thousand cubic feet (2007 dollars) [*68*]. The cost estimate is relatively low, because an extensive North Slope infrastructure has been built and paid for with revenues from oil production, and because there is considerably less exploration, development, and production risk associated with known deposits of AD natural gas.

Although additional AD natural gas might be discovered offshore or in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), most of the "second tier" discoveries in areas to the west and south of the Central North Slope are expected to consist of NA natural gas in gas-only reservoirs. Production costs for gas-only reservoirs are expected to be considerably higher than those for AD natural gas, because they are in remote locations. In addition, the full costs of their development will have to be paid for with revenues from the natural gas generated at the wellhead.

For the first tier of North Slope NA natural gas (29.2 trillion cubic feet) production costs are expected to average $7.91 per thousand cubic feet (2007 dollars). For the second tier, production costs are expected to average $11.03 per thousand cubic feet. Because the cost of producing NA natural gas is substantially greater than the cost of producing AD natural gas, this analysis uses the lower production costs for AD natural gas to evaluate the economic merits of the three facility options examined.

Facility Cost Assumptions

Of the three facility options, the costs associated with an Alaska gas pipeline are reasonably well defined, because they are based on the November 2007 pipeline proposals submitted to the State of Alaska by ConocoPhillips and TransCanada Pipelines, in compliance with the requirements of the Alaska Gasline Inducement Act (AGIA). Costs associated with GTL and LNG facilities are more speculative, based on the costs of similar facilities elsewhere in the world, adjusted for the remote Alaska location and for recent worldwide increases in construction costs (Table 11).

Other key assumptions for all the options analyzed include natural gas feedstock requirements, natural gas heating values, characteristics of the operations, State and Federal income tax rates, and the time required for planning, obtaining required permits, and constructing the facilities. Key assumptions that are unique to each option include the following: for the Alaska pipeline option, the tariff rate for the existing pipeline from Alberta to Chicago and the spot price for natural gas in Chicago; for the LNG facility option, capital and operating costs, including the cost of building a pipeline from the North Slope to

Table 11. Assumptions for comparison of three Alaska North Slope natural gas facility options

Assumption	*Pipeline option*	*LNG option*	*GTL option*
Natural gas conversion efficiency (percent)	*94*	*80*	*60*
Capital costs (billion 2007 dollars)	*27.6*	*33.9*	*57.5*
Operating costs (million 2007dollars per year)	*263.0*	*392.9*	*894.3*

liquefaction and storage facilities in Valdez, and the value of LNG delivered in Asia and Valdez; and for the GTL facility option, the time required to conduct tests to determine whether the Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) should be operated in batch or commingled mode with GTL, the production level and mix of product, the oil pipeline tariff and tanker rates to U.S. West Coast refiners, and the price of GTL products relative crude oil prices. The costs of testing and possibly converting TAPS into a batching crude/product pipeline are not included for the GTL option.

Discussion

To compare the economics of the three options, an internal rate of return (IRR) was calculated for each alternative, based on the projected average price of light, low-sulfur crude oil and the projected average price of natural gas on the Henry Hub spot market in the *AEO2009* reference, high oil price, and low oil price cases for the 2011-2020 and 2021-2030 periods (Table 12). The IRR calculations (Figures 20 and 21) assume that the average prices for the period in which a facility begins operation will persist throughout the 20-year economic life of the facility. Projected crude oil prices show considerably more variation across the cases and time periods than do Henry Hub natural gas prices, affecting the relative economics of the three options. In 2030, in the low and high oil price cases, crude oil prices are $50 and $200 per barrel, respectively, and natural gas prices are $8.70 and $9.62 per million Btu, respectively (all prices in 2007 dollars).

The *AEO2009* projections show wide variations in oil prices, which are set outside the NEMS framework to reflect a range of potential future price paths. For natural gas prices, variations across the cases are smaller, reflecting the feedbacks in NEMS that equilibrate supply, demand, and prices in the natural gas market model. Natural gas price increases are held in check by declines in demand (especially in the electric power sector) and increases in natural gas drilling, reserves, and production capacity. Similarly, natural gas price declines are held in check by increases in demand and decreases in drilling, reserves, and production capacity. Natural gas prices are also restrained because only a small portion of the natural gas resource base is projected to be consumed through 2030, and the marginal cost of natural gas supply increases slowly.

Table 12. Average crude oil and natural gas prices in three cases, 2011-2020 and 2021-2030

	2011-2020	2021-2030
Oil price (2007 dollars per barrel)		
Reference	107.32	123.26
High oil price	154.24	193.25
Low oil price	51.61	50.31
Natural gas price (2007 dollars per million Btu)		
Reference	7.04	8.21
High oil price	7.52	8.50
Low oil price	6.24	7.88

As indicated in Figures 20 and 21, IRRs for the pipeline option are sensitive to natural gas price levels, whereas IRRs for the GTL and LNG options are more sensitive to crude oil prices. Consequently, from 2021 through 2030, IRRs for the pipeline option vary by 15 to 17 percent across the three price cases, whereas those for the GTL and LNG options vary by 4 to 24 percent and 7 to 27 percent, respectively. On that basis, the pipeline option would be considerably less

Figure 20. Average internal rates of return for three Alaska North Slope natural gas facility options in three cases, 2011-2020 (percent)

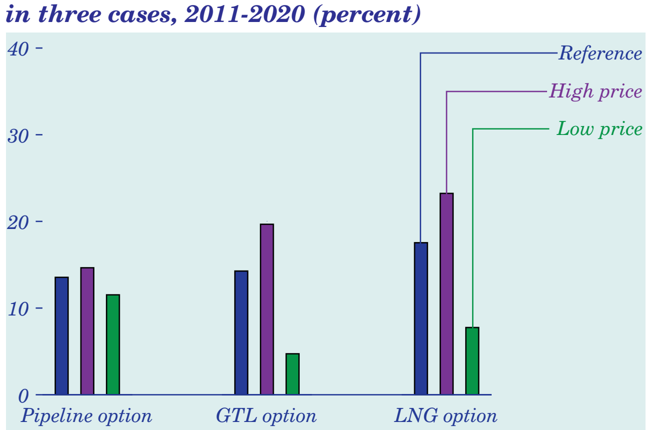
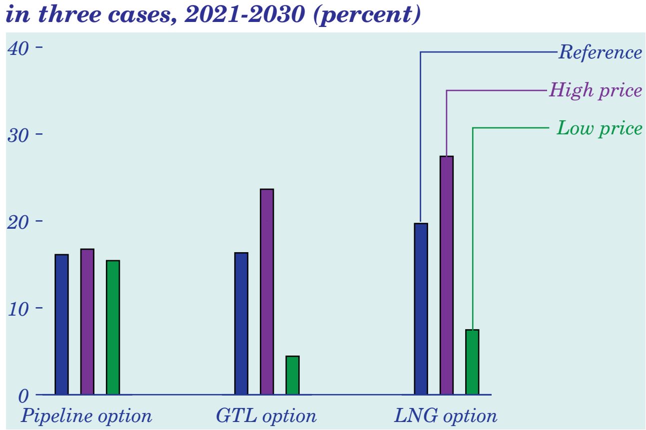


Figure 21. Average internal rates of return for three Alaska North Slope natural gas facility options in three cases, 2021-2030 (percent)



risky than either the GTL or LNG option. Also, the pipeline would involve significantly less engineering, construction, and operation risk than either of the other options.

The potential viability of an Alaska natural gas pipeline is bolstered by the fact that British Petroleum (BP), ConocoPhillips (CP), and TransCanada Pipelines already have committed to building a pipeline. All three have extensive experience in building and financing large-scale energy projects, and both BP and CP have access to substantial portions of the less expensive North Slope AD natural gas reserves. Given that institutional support, along with the prospect for adequate rates of return, the natural gas pipeline option appears to have the greatest likelihood of being built.

Because the GTL option does not include the cost of testing and adapting the existing TAPS oil pipeline to GTL products—which would require third-party cooperation and likely cost reimbursement—the GTL rates of return are overstated. In addition, the GTL results include considerable uncertainty with regard to capital and operating costs and future environmental constraints on GTL plants. Prospects for Alaska GTL facilities are further clouded by the current absence of project sponsors.

Of the three options, an LNG export facility shows the highest rates of return in the reference and high price cases; however, it shows low rates of return in the low price case. The project risk associated with the LNG option is considerably less than that for the GTL option but greater than for the pipeline option. The LNG option is further undermined by the fact that there are large reserves of stranded natural gas elsewhere in the world that have a significant competitive advantage both because of their proximity to large consumer markets and because they would not require construction of an 800-mile supply pipeline. Although there is definite interest in the LNG export option in Alaska, current advocates of the project have not yet secured letters of intent from potential buyers to purchase the LNG, nor do they have ownership of low-cost AD reserves, extensive experience in the management of large-scale projects, or strong financial backing. Finally, if oil shale deposits in the rest of the world turn out to be as rich in natural gas as those in the United States, worldwide demand for LNG could be reduced considerably from the levels that were expected just a few years ago.

Other Issues

The analysis described here focused primarily on the relative economics and risks associated with each of three options for a facility to bring natural gas from Alaska's North Slope to market. There are, in addition, a number of other issues that could be important in determining which facility option could proceed to construction and operation, three of which are described briefly below.

Resolving ownership issues for the Point Thomson natural gas condensate field lease. The State of Alaska has revoked the Point Thomson lease from the original leaseholders. Point Thomson holds approximately 8 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas reserves, and without that supply, the existing North Slope AD reserves would be insufficient to supply a natural gas pipeline over a 20-year lifetime. The 35.4 trillion cubic feet of existing AD natural gas reserves on the Central North Slope includes Point Thomson's 8 trillion cubic feet, and without those reserves only 27.4 trillion cubic feet of North Slope gas reserves would be available, providing just 18.8 years of supply for a 4 billion cubic feet per day facility. As long as the ownership issue of the Point Thomson lease remains unresolved, the possibility of pursuing construction of any of the three options is diminished.

Obtaining permits for an Alaska natural gas pipeline in Canada. The pipeline option could encounter significant permitting issues in Canada, similar to those that have already been encountered by the Mackenzie Delta gas pipeline, whose construction has been significantly delayed as the result of a failure to secure necessary permits. Because there have been no filings for Canadian permits by any Alaska gas pipeline sponsor, the severity of this potential problem cannot be determined.

Exporting Alaska LNG to foreign consumers. Some parties in the United States have called for a halt to current exports of LNG from Alaska to overseas markets. If Alaska were prohibited from exporting LNG to overseas consumers, the financial risk associated with any new Alaska LNG facility would increase significantly, because the financial viability of an LNG facility would be tied solely to lower 48 natural gas prices, which are projected to be considerably lower than overseas natural gas prices.

Shipping GTL products through TAPS. The joint ownership structure of TAPS could prevent a minority owner from using the pipeline to ship GTL from the North Slope south to Valdez and on to market.

Conclusion

The *AEO2009* price cases project greater variance in oil prices than in natural gas prices. If those cases provide a reasonable reflection of potential future outcomes, then the pipeline option in this analysis would be exposed to less financial risk than the GTL and LNG options. Additionally, it is the only option that already has the commitment of energy companies capable of financing and constructing such a large, capital-intensive energy facility. The balance of the factors evaluated here points to an Alaska natural gas pipeline as being the most likely choice for bringing North Slope natural gas to market.

Endnotes

66. The GTL option is represented in NEMS in the form of facilities with capacities of 34,000 barrel per day that can be added incrementally when oil and petroleum product prices are sufficiently high to make their operation profitable.
67. Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Oil and Gas, *Alaska Oil and Gas Report 2007* (Anchorage, AK, July 2007), Table III.1, p.-2, web site www.dog.dnr.state.ak.us/oil/products/publications/annual/report.htm.
68. K.W. Sherwood and J.D. Craig, *Prospects for Development of Alaska Natural Gas: A Review as of January 2001* (Anchorage, AK: U.S. Department of Interior, Minerals Management Service, Resource Evaluation Office), Chapters 4 and 5, web site www.mms.gov/alaska/re/natgas/akngas2.pdf. Resource recovery costs were updated for this analysis, to reflect the escalation of drilling costs over time.