Ranking Member Whitehouse, Senator Markey, and Member of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the urgent need to reduce methane emissions and responsibly transition away from fossil gas. My name is Lori Ehrlich. I served for 14 years as a Massachusetts State Representative and later as the FEMA Regional Administrator for New England.

Years of experience have clarified for me the public safety threat and significant consumer cost associated with methane leaks at the local and regional level. I first became aware of the issue when I learned that unrepaired gas leaks in my community were killing trees by depriving their roots of oxygen. Replanted trees would also die because leaks were not repaired, a practice that cost millions and frustrated towns to the point of a class action lawsuit.

Massachusetts has the nation's 2nd oldest gas infrastructure, with over 25,000 known and unrepaired leaks. Gas companies internally graded leaks by their hazard potential; so-called "low-hazard" leaks could persist for decades. There was no incentive to repair, because customers paid for lost and unaccounted for gas while the gas companies avoided the cost of repairs, and there was no accountability. My first filing in 2009 put this hazard scale into statute and included a designation for trees.

The hazard scale recognizes that methane leaks threaten human life. According to analysis from U.S. PIRG, Environment America, and Frontier Group, a gas pipeline incident occurs somewhere in the United States every 40 hours. From 2010 through 2021, almost 2,600 pipeline incidents were federally reported, 328 of which caused explosions. These explosions killed 122 people and injured 603. One of these incidents occurred in 2018 in the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts, where a gas pressure problem caused more than 80 fires in three towns, killing one person, injuring 22 others, and shutting down gas supplies for months. In addition, home explosions, some fatal, occur in Massachusetts on an alarmingly regular basis. While serving as the FEMA Region 1 Administrator, I was faced with the additional threats that climate-driven flooding and extreme weather events pose to the infrastructure of highly pressurized and highly combustible methane running under our streets.

In addition to safety concerns, both high and low-risk leaks from faulty pipelines waste a tremendous amount of gas, which drives up consumer energy costs. According to analysis by the Environmental Defense Fund, pipelines nationwide leak upwards of 2.6 million tons of methane each year. The distribution sector accounts for almost one-third of this waste. That third amounts to over half a billion dollars of wasted gas, at current residential natural gas prices. Consumers are on the hook for all that wasted gas.

Under the Biden Administration, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration worked in consensus with industry, communities, and experts to update a leak detection and repair rule for natural gas pipelines, as directed by the bipartisan PIPES Act that President Trump signed into law in his first term. Unfortunately, the new Trump Administration has withdrawn this rule, forcing Americans to subsidize corporate waste and causing the continued emissions of over 500,000 metric tons of methane each year that would have been captured with the rule.

But action can be taken at the state level: working with a bipartisan coalition of unions, first responders, environmentalists, and concerned citizens, I led several bills into law that require leak grading, monitoring, repair, information transparency, worker safety, winter patrol, gate box visibility, and scheduling repair of super emitter leaks.

The overall impact of this work in MA can be measured in lives saved, methane emissions reduced, and the demonstration of a better way forward, all which continues today.

Of course, we know that the ultimate answer to the climate crisis is to transition to zero-emissions energy sources. Massachusetts is leading the way, and having an impact: thanks to electrification efforts, gas use in Massachusetts buildings has declined by 17% from 2019 to 2024. But the science is clear: we must tackle methane emissions in parallel to decarbonization.

We have a narrow window to meet our climate goals. A just, strategic transition away from gas—and toward clean, efficient alternatives—is not only achievable, it's already underway in places like Massachusetts. With the right federal support, that momentum can become a national model.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to tackling methane pollution and protecting our shared future. I welcome your questions.