GIS DATA FROM HTSI (PIPELINES INCLUDING PETROLEUM) AND TELE ATLAS NORTH AMERICA / ESRI (WATER). LNG IMPORT LOCATIONS FROM FEDERAL ENERGY REGULATORY COMMISSION.

→ All pipelines lead to Texas

by CHRISTOF SPIELER

North America's network of gas pipelines maps out production and consumption. The densest webs are in the gas fields. North America's leading producers are Texas, Alberta, Alaska, Wyoming, and Oklahoma. From there, long straight lines lead to the population centers of the Northeast and the Upper Midwest, where gas heats homes and businesses, generates electricity, and produces other chemicals.

The pipeline industry was once a closely regulated, reliably profitable utility. Pipeline firms bought gas from wells, transported the gas, and resold it. When gas prices were deregulated in 1978, pipeline companies signed huge long-term contracts for gas. When gas prices fell, they were left buying high and selling low. The resulting upheaval finally lead to the separation of transport and production; today pipeline companies simply sell space in their pipes.

About three percent of U.S. natural gas comes from abroad in liquid (LNG) form on ships equipped with huge spherical presssurized tanks. But that share is increasing. Some of the terminals that handle these imports are near consumption areas—the one 2 miles from Downtown Boston got media attention post-9/11 for its security risk—but production areas like Texas work, too, because of their excellent pipeline connections. An LNG terminal in Freeport went online in 2008.