Interstate Transportation of Natural Gas Is Generally Reliable, but FERC Should Better Identify and Assess Emerging Risks

What GAO Found
Available information indicates that the transportation of natural gas by interstate transmission pipelines has been generally reliable. Using reports submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which oversees the reliability of service provided by interstate transmission pipelines, GAO found that interruptions in natural gas service without advance notice to customers occurred an average of 28 times a year from 2015 to 2019. In contrast, in a single year (2018), every electric power consumer in the United States, on average, went without power for 5.8 hours. However, gas interruptions usually did not result in a complete loss of service to affected consumers. Representatives of natural gas industry sectors—including gas distribution companies, which typically rely on interstate transmission pipelines for access to natural gas—agreed that the transportation of natural gas via pipelines is generally reliable.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that FERC: (1) use available information, such as reports by transmission pipeline operators on service interruptions, to identify and assess risks to the reliability of this service and (2) develop an approach to respond, as appropriate, to any identified risks. FERC agreed to establish a process to incorporate such information into its ongoing efforts to monitor and address reliability of interstate transmission pipeline service.

Industry representatives and state officials told GAO that risks to the reliability of natural gas service on interstate transmission pipelines could increase in the future due to more intensive use, driven by greater domestic gas production and use by electric power plants. However, because natural gas service has consistently been reliable, FERC does not routinely use all available information—including reports provided by natural gas transmission pipeline operators on the frequency and effects of service interruptions—to identify, assess, and respond to risks. Maintaining the reliable transportation of natural gas, which is integral to ensuring reliable energy service, involves understanding and being prepared to respond to risks as they emerge. By not routinely using all available information to identify and assess potential risks to the reliability of service on interstate transmission pipelines, FERC is not well positioned to respond, if necessary, to changes in the natural gas industry in order to ensure consumers continue to have reliable service.