

**11:14 23Dec2009 RTRS-UPDATE 1-POLL-US natgas stocks seen down 173 bcf in weekly EIAs
(Adds weather data, background, table)**

NEW YORK, Dec 23 (Reuters) - U.S. natural gas storage levels are expected to fall by 173 billion cubic feet when weekly data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration are released early Thursday, according to a Reuters poll.

In the weekly survey of 24 industry traders and analysts, withdrawal estimates for the week ended Dec. 18 ranged from 150 bcf to 191 bcf.

Stocks fell an adjusted 144 bcf for the same week last year. The five-year average drop for that week is 128 bcf.

The median draw in the survey was 174 bcf.

The EIA storage report will be issued Thursday at 10:30 a.m. EST (1530 GMT).

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said there were 185 heating degree days last week, 27 warmer than the previous week, 1 warmer than normal and 7 warmer than the same week last year.

Degree days, a measure of departure in the mean daily temperature from 65 degrees Fahrenheit (18 degrees Celsius), are used to reflect demand for energy to heat or cool homes and businesses.

In the last report, overall storage fell 207 bcf.

It was only the heating season's second draw but it came in above the Reuters poll estimate of 179 bcf and well above the year-ago drop of 116 bcf and the five-year average decline for that week of 127 bcf.

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Last week's EIA report showed total domestic gas inventories slipped to 3.566 trillion cubic feet after hitting an all-time high of 3.837 tcf for the week ended Nov. 27.

Total inventories are still at record highs for this time of year, standing at 381 bcf, or 12 percent, above last year and 433 bcf, or 14 percent, above the five-year average.

Eastern stocks fell 93 bcf in the last report but held at 10 percent above last year's levels.

Consuming Region West storage, which lost 39 bcf for the week, slipped to 5 percent above the same year-ago week.

Inventories in the Producing Region tumbled 75 bcf and dropped to 20 percent above the same week in 2008.

Traders said steady cash premiums to NYMEX futures that week coupled with decent weather demand again prompted an above average storage pull, particularly from the more economically-focused Producing Region.

A total draw Thursday at the Reuters estimate would again trim the storage surplus to last year to about 352 bcf.

In the previous four reports, total stocks fell 267 bcf, or 67 bcf per week, versus a 301 bcf adjusted decline for the same one-month period last year and a 281 bcf five-year average drop for that period.

NOAA said it expected 188 heating degree days this week, 8 warmer than normal and 17 warmer than the same year-ago week.

Early withdrawal estimates for next week's EIA report range from 137 bcf to 180 bcf versus a 144 bcf adjusted decline for the same week last year.

Even if as much as 700 bcf is pulled from storage this month due to the cold, versus a more normal draw of about 500 bcf, stocks on Jan. 1 would still be above 3.1 tcf, more than 200 bcf above average for that time of year.

If drawdowns for the rest of the winter match the five-year average pace, inventories will end the heating season at a record high 1.9 tcf, 40 percent above normal and a comfortable level to start rebuilding stocks this spring.

The following is a partial list of forecasters who participated in this week's survey. If forecasters provided a range, the midpoint was used. Numbers in billion cubic feet (bcf).

Caprock	- 174
CH Guernsey	- 162
Citi Futures	- 175
enerjay	- 170
FC Stone	- 178
First Enercast	- 175
FirstEnergy	- 170
Gelber & Assoc	- 165
Hencorp	- 189
JPMorgan	- 177
Lind-Waldock	- 175
MF Global	- 173
PFGBest	- 150
Prestige Economics	- 172
Raymond James	- 180
Ritterbusch & Assoc	- 182
SMC Forecasting	- 174
Stephen Smith Energy	- 168
Strategic Energy	- 165
Summit Energy	- 173
Tradition Energy	- 191

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