

HOUSTON EXPLORATION CO

Form S-3

October 27, 2004

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As filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission on October 27, 2004

Registration No. 333-_____

**SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20549**

**FORM S-3
REGISTRATION STATEMENT UNDER THE SECURITIES ACT OF 1933**

THE HOUSTON EXPLORATION COMPANY
(Exact name of registrant as specified in its charter)

**1100 Louisiana, Suite 2000
Houston, Texas 77002-5215
(713) 830-6800**

(Name, address, including zip code, and telephone number, including area code, of agent for service)

Delaware
(State or other jurisdiction of incorporation or
organization)

22-2674487
(I.R.S. Employer Identification No.)

John H. Karnes
Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer
1100 Louisiana, Suite 2000
Houston, Texas 77002-5215
(713) 830-6800

(Name, address, including zip code, and telephone number, including area code, of agent for service)

Copy to:
Christine B. LaFollette
Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP
1111 Louisiana Street, 44th Floor
Houston, Texas 77002
(713) 220-5896

APPROXIMATE DATE OF COMMENCEMENT OF PROPOSED SALE TO THE PUBLIC: From time to time after the effective date of this Registration Statement, as determined in light of market conditions and other factors.

If the only securities being registered on this Form are being offered pursuant to dividend or interest reinvestment plans, please check the following box. []

If any of the securities being registered on this Form are to be offered on a delayed or continuous basis pursuant to Rule 415 under the Securities Act of 1933, other than securities offered only in connection with dividend or interest reinvestment plans, check the following box. [X]

If this Form is filed to register additional securities for an offering pursuant to Rule 462(b) under the Securities Act, please check the following box and list the Securities Act registration statement number of the earlier effective

registration statement for the same offering. []

If this Form is a post-effective amendment filed pursuant to Rule 462(c) under the Securities Act, check the following box and list the Securities Act registration statement number of the earlier effective registration statement for the same offering. []

If delivery of the prospectus is expected to be made pursuant to Rule 434 under the Securities Act, please check the following box. []

CALCULATION OF REGISTRATION FEE

Title of Each Class of Securities to Be Registered	Amount to Be Registered ⁽¹⁾	Proposed Maximum Aggregate Price Per Security	Proposed Maximum Aggregate Offering Price	Amount of Registration Fee ^{(2) (3)}
Common Stock, par value \$0.01 per share ⁽⁴⁾				
Preferred Stock, par value \$0.01 per share				
Depositary Shares ⁽⁵⁾				
Debt Securities ⁽⁶⁾				
Total	\$477,360,000	100% ⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾⁽⁹⁾	477,360,000 ⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾⁽⁹⁾	\$60,481

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- (1) In no event will the aggregate offering price of all securities issued from time to time by us pursuant to this registration statement exceed \$477,360,000.
- (2) Pursuant to Rule 429 under the Securities Act of 1933, the prospectus included in this Registration Statement also relates to (i) \$272,640,000 aggregate initial offering price of the Registrant's securities and (ii) 6,580,392 shares of the Registrant's common stock owned by the selling securityholder that were previously registered pursuant to Registration Statement No. 333-113659 and have not yet been issued and sold. Such securities are carried forward into the prospectus included in this Registration Statement.
- (3) Calculated pursuant to Rule 457(o) at the statutory rate of \$127.60 per \$1,000,000 aggregate initial offering price of securities registered. With respect to (i) the \$272,640,000 aggregate initial offering price of the Registrant's securities and (ii) 6,580,392 shares of the Registrant's common stock owned by the selling securityholder previously registered and carried forward into the prospectus included with this Registration Statement pursuant to Rule 429 under the Securities Act, the Registrant has previously paid the related filing fees. In connection with this Registration Statement, the Registrant is paying a fee based solely on the additional securities being registered and having an aggregate initial public offering price of \$477,360,000.
- (4) Each share of common stock registered hereunder includes an associated Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock purchase right. Until the occurrence of certain prescribed events, none of which has occurred, the Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock purchase rights are not exercisable, are evidenced by certificates representing the common stock, and may be transferred only with the common stock. No separate consideration is payable for the Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock purchase rights.
- (5) Such indeterminate number of Depositary Shares to be evidenced by Depositary Receipts issued pursuant to a Deposit Agreement. In the event that the registrant elects to offer to the public fractional interests in shares of Preferred Stock registered hereunder, Depositary Receipts will be distributed to those persons purchasing the fractional interests and the shares of Preferred Stock will be issued to the Depositary under the Deposit Agreement.
- (6) If any Debt Securities are issued at an original issue discount, then the offering price of the Debt Securities shall be in such amount as shall result in an aggregate initial offering price not to exceed \$477,360,000, less the offering price of any securities previously issued hereunder.
- (7) The proposed maximum offering price per unit will be determined from time to time by the registrant in connection with the issuance by the registrant of the securities registered hereunder.
- (8) This registration statement also covers such indeterminate amount of securities as may be issued in exchange for, or upon conversion or exercise of, as the case may be, the Debt Securities, Preferred Stock or Depositary Shares registered hereunder. Any securities registered hereunder may be sold separately or as units with other securities registered hereunder.
- (9) Estimated solely for the purpose of calculating the registration fee pursuant to Rule 457(o) under the Securities Act of 1933.

Pursuant to Rule 429 under the Securities Act of 1933, the prospectus included in this Registration Statement and any supplements to such prospectus also relates to the remaining (i) \$272,640,000 aggregate principal amount of the Registrant's securities and (ii) 6,580,392 shares of the Registrant's common stock owned by the selling securityholder, each previously registered under the Securities Act of 1933 by Registration Statement No. 333-113659.

The registrant hereby amends this registration statement on such date or dates as may be necessary to delay its effective date until the registrant shall file a further amendment which specifically states that this registration statement shall thereafter become effective in accordance with Section 8(a) of the Securities Act

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of 1933, or until this registration statement shall become effective on such date as the Commission, acting pursuant to said Section 8(a), may determine.

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The information in this preliminary prospectus is not complete and may be changed. We may not sell these securities until the registration statement filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission is effective. This preliminary prospectus is not an offer to sell these securities and it is not soliciting an offer to buy these securities in any state where the offer or sale is not permitted.

Subject to Completion, Dated October 27, 2004

PROSPECTUS
THE HOUSTON EXPLORATION COMPANY
\$750,000,000
COMMON STOCK
PREFERRED STOCK
DEPOSITARY SHARES
DEBT SECURITIES

6,580,392 SHARES OF COMMON STOCK

We may offer and sell from time to time in one or more offerings:

shares of common stock;

shares of preferred stock, in one or more series, which may be convertible into or exchangeable for common stock or debt securities and which may be issued in the form of depositary shares evidenced by depositary receipts; and

senior or subordinated unsecured debt securities in one or more series.

In addition, KeySpan Corporation, one of our securityholders, may offer and sell from time to time in one or more offerings up to 6,580,392 shares of our common stock.

The aggregate initial offering price of the securities that we will offer will not exceed \$750,000,000. The aggregate amount of our common stock that the selling securityholder will offer will not exceed 6,580,392 shares. We or the selling securityholder will offer the securities in amounts, at prices and on terms to be determined by market conditions at the time of the offerings. The securities may be offered separately or together in any combination or as separate series.

We will provide the specific terms of the securities offered in supplements to this prospectus. You should read this prospectus and the prospectus supplements carefully before you invest in any of our securities. This prospectus may not be used to consummate sales of our securities unless it is accompanied by a prospectus supplement. The prospectus supplement may add, update or change information contained in this prospectus.

The amount of common stock to be offered by the selling securityholder identified herein will be specified in prospectus supplements. We will not receive any proceeds from any sale of common stock by the selling securityholder.

We or the selling securityholder may sell these securities directly or through agents, underwriters or dealers, or through a combination of these methods. See Plan of Distribution. The prospectus supplement will list any agents, underwriters or dealers that may be involved and the compensation they will receive. The prospectus supplement also will show you the total amount of money that we or the selling securityholder will receive from selling the securities being offered, after the expenses of the offering.

Our common stock is listed for trading on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol THX.

Neither the securities and exchange commission nor any state securities commission has approved or disapproved of these securities or determined whether this prospectus is truthful or complete. Any representation to the contrary is a criminal offense.

This prospectus may not be used to consummate sales of the securities unless accompanied by the applicable prospectus supplement.

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The prospectus is dated _____, 2004.

YOU SHOULD RELY ONLY ON THE INFORMATION INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE OR PROVIDED IN THIS PROSPECTUS OR ANY PROSPECTUS SUPPLEMENT. WE HAVE NOT AUTHORIZED ANYONE ELSE TO PROVIDE YOU WITH DIFFERENT INFORMATION. WE ARE NOT MAKING AN OFFER OF THESE SECURITIES IN ANY STATE WHERE THE OFFER IS NOT PERMITTED. YOU SHOULD NOT ASSUME THAT THE INFORMATION INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE OR PROVIDED IN THIS PROSPECTUS OR ANY PROSPECTUS SUPPLEMENT IS ACCURATE AS OF ANY DATE OTHER THAN THE DATE ON THE FRONT OF THOSE DOCUMENTS.

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ABOUT THIS PROSPECTUS

This prospectus is part of a registration statement that we have filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission using a shelf registration process. Under this shelf registration process, we may sell from time to time any combination of the different types of securities described in this prospectus in one or more offerings up to a total offering amount of \$750,000,000, and the selling securityholder may sell from time to time our common stock described in this prospectus in one or more offerings of up to a total of 6,580,392 shares. This prospectus only provides you with a general description of the securities we or the selling securityholder may offer. Each time securities are offered under this prospectus, we will provide a prospectus supplement that will contain specific information about the terms of that offering and the securities offered in that offering. The prospectus supplement may also add, update or change information in this prospectus. You should read both this prospectus and any prospectus supplement, together with the additional information described below under the heading Where You Can Find More Information.

In this prospectus references to Houston Exploration, we, us and our mean The Houston Exploration Company.

WHERE YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION

We file annual, quarterly and special reports and other information with the SEC. Our SEC filings are available to the public over the Internet or at the SEC's web site at <http://www.sec.gov>. You may also read and copy any document we file at the SEC's public reference rooms in Washington, D.C., New York, New York and Chicago, Illinois. Please call the SEC at 1-800-SEC-0330 for further information on the operation of its public reference rooms. Our common stock is listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange (the NYSE). You may also inspect the information we file with the SEC at the NYSE's offices at 20 Broad Street, New York, New York 10005. The information we file with the SEC and other information about us also is available on our website at <http://www.houstonexploration.com>. However, the information on our website is not a part of this prospectus.

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The SEC allows us to incorporate by reference the information we file with it, which means that we can disclose important information to you by referring you to those documents. The information incorporated by reference is considered to be part of this prospectus, and information that we file later with the SEC will automatically update and may supersede information in this prospectus and information previously filed with the SEC. We incorporate by reference the documents listed below and any future filings made with the SEC under Sections 13(a), 13(c), 14 or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 until we sell all of the securities that may be offered by this prospectus:

our Annual Report on Form 10-K for the year ended December 31, 2003;

our Quarterly Report on Form 10-Q for the quarter ended March 31, 2004;

our Quarterly Report on Form 10-Q for the quarter ended June 30, 2004;

our Current Reports on Form 8-K filed August 5, August 13, September 22 and October 27, 2004;

the description of our common stock contained in Amendment No. 1 to our Registration Statement on Form 8-A filed on September 19, 1996 under Section 12 of the Exchange Act; and

the description of our preferred stock purchase rights in our Registration Statement on Form 8-A filed on August 13, 2004 under Section 12 of the Exchange Act.

You may review these filings, at no cost, over the Internet at our website at <http://www.houstonexploration.com>, or request a copy of these filings by writing or calling us at the following address:

Investor Relations
The Houston Exploration Company
1100 Louisiana, Suite 2000
Houston, Texas 77002-5215
(713) 830-6800

FORWARD-LOOKING STATEMENTS

Some of the information, including all of the estimates and assumptions, contained in this prospectus, any prospectus supplement and the documents we have incorporated by reference contain forward-looking statements. These statements use forward-looking words such as anticipate, believe, expect, estimate, may, project, will, similar expressions and discuss forward-looking information, including the following:

future production;

expected costs and expenses;

anticipated capital expenditures;

future cash flows and borrowings;

pursuit of potential future acquisition opportunities; and

sources of funding and the time of exploration and development.

Although we believe that these forward-looking statements are based on reasonable assumptions, our expectations may not occur and we cannot guarantee that the anticipated future results will be achieved. A number of factors could cause our actual future results to differ materially from the anticipated future results expressed in this prospectus, any prospectus supplement and the documents we have incorporated by reference. These factors include, among other things:

the volatility of natural gas and oil prices;

the requirement to take writedowns if natural gas and oil prices decline or if our finding and development costs continue to increase;

the relatively short production lives of our reserves;

our ability to find, develop and acquire natural gas and oil reserves;

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acquisition and investment risks;

our ability to meet our substantial capital requirements;

our outstanding indebtedness;

the uncertainty of estimates of natural gas and oil reserves and production rates;

the inherent hazards and risks involved in our operations;

the concentrated nature of our operations;

dependence upon operations concentrated in three primary areas;

our hedging activities;

compliance with environmental and other governmental regulations;

the competitive nature of our industry;

weather risks and other natural disasters;

our customers' ability to meet their obligations; and

the influence by our significant stockholder, KeySpan Corporation.

Other factors that could cause actual results to differ materially from those anticipated are discussed in our periodic filings with the SEC, including our Annual Report on Form 10-K for the year ended December 31, 2003 and our Quarterly Report on Form 10-Q for the quarter ended June 30, 2004.

When considering these forward-looking statements, you should keep in mind the risk factors and other cautionary statements in this document, any prospectus supplement and the documents we have incorporated by reference. We will not update these forward-looking statements unless the securities laws require us to do so.

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THE HOUSTON EXPLORATION COMPANY

We are an independent natural gas and oil company engaged in the exploration, development, exploitation and acquisition of natural gas and oil reserves in North America. Natural gas is our primary focus. Our primary areas of operations are South Texas, offshore in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the Arkoma Basin of Oklahoma and Arkansas. During 2003, we began operations in the Rocky Mountain Region, with an initial focus in the Uinta Basin of northeastern Utah. We divested our Appalachian Basin assets in June 2004 in an asset exchange transaction with KeySpan Corporation, a significant stockholder. As of December 31, 2003, we had 50.5 Bcfe of estimated proved reserves in the Appalachian Basin.

At December 31, 2003, our net proved reserves were 755 billion cubic feet equivalent, or Bcfe, with a present value, discounted at 10% per annum, of cash flows before income taxes of \$2.0 billion. Our reserves are fully engineered on an annual basis by independent petroleum engineers. Approximately 94% of our net proved reserves at December 31, 2003 were natural gas, approximately 68% of which were classified as proved developed. We operate approximately 85% of our producing wells.

We began exploring for natural gas and oil in December 1985 on behalf of The Brooklyn Union Gas Company, an indirect wholly owned subsidiary of KeySpan Corporation. KeySpan is a diversified energy provider whose principal natural gas distribution and electric generation operations are located in the Northeastern United States. In September 1996, we completed our initial public offering and sold approximately 31% of our shares to the public. As of October 27, 2004, KeySpan Energy Development Corporation, formerly known as THEC Holdings Corp., an indirect wholly owned subsidiary of KeySpan, owned approximately 23% of our outstanding common stock.

Our principal executive offices are located at 1100 Louisiana, Suite 2000, Houston, Texas 77002. Our telephone number is (713) 830-6800.

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Unless we specify otherwise in the accompanying prospectus supplement, we intend to use the net proceeds we receive from the sale of the securities offered by this prospectus and the accompanying prospectus supplement for the repayment of debt and for general corporate purposes. General corporate purposes may include additions to working capital, repurchases of our stock, capital expenditures or the financing of possible acquisitions, including acquisitions of onshore and offshore natural gas and oil properties. If we do not use the net proceeds immediately, we may temporarily invest them in short-term, interest-bearing obligations.

We will not receive any proceeds from the sale of any shares of our common stock that may be offered by the selling securityholder.

RATIO OF EARNINGS TO FIXED CHARGES

The following table sets forth our ratio of earnings to fixed charges:

	Years Ended December 31,					Six Months Ended June 30,	
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2003	2004
Ratio of earnings to fixed charges.	2.0x	5.5x	12.8x	7.6x	13.6x	15.3x	16.2x

For the purpose of computing the ratio of earnings to fixed charges, earnings are defined as:

income from continuing operations before income taxes;

plus fixed charges; and

less capitalized interest.

Fixed charges are defined as the sum of the following:

interest (including capitalized interest) on all indebtedness; and

that portion of rental expense which we believe to be representative of an interest factor.

DESCRIPTION OF DEBT SECURITIES*General*

We may issue senior or subordinated debt securities. Neither the senior debt securities nor the subordinated debt securities will be secured by any property or assets of Houston Exploration. Thus, by owning a debt security, you are one of our unsecured creditors.

The senior debt securities will constitute part of our senior debt, will be issued under our senior debt indenture described below and will rank equally with all of our other unsecured and unsubordinated debt.

The subordinated debt securities will constitute part of our subordinated debt, will be issued under our subordinated debt indenture described below and will be subordinate in right of payment to all of our senior debt, as defined in the subordinated debt indenture. The prospectus supplement for any series of subordinated debt securities or the information incorporated in this prospectus by reference will indicate the approximate amount of senior indebtedness outstanding as of the end of our most recent fiscal quarter. Neither indenture limits our ability to incur additional senior indebtedness.

When we refer to debt securities in this prospectus, we mean both the senior debt securities and the subordinated debt securities.

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The debt indentures and their associated documents, including your debt security, contain the full legal text of the matters described in this section and your prospectus supplement. We have filed copies of the indentures with the SEC as exhibits to our registration statements. See *Where You Can Find More Information* above for information on how to obtain copies of them.

This section and your prospectus supplement summarize all the material terms of the indentures and your debt security. They do not, however, describe every aspect of the indentures and your debt security. For example, in this section we use terms that have been given special meaning in the indentures, but we describe the meaning for only the more important of those terms.

Senior Debt Indenture and Subordinated Debt Indenture

The senior debt securities and the subordinated debt securities are each governed by a document called an indenture—the senior debt indenture, in the case of the senior debt securities, and the subordinated debt indenture, in the case of the subordinated debt securities. Each indenture is a contract between us and a trustee to be determined later. The indentures are substantially identical, except for certain provisions including those relating to subordination, which are included only in the subordinated debt indenture.

The trustee under each indenture has two main roles:

First, the trustee can enforce your rights against us if we default. There are some limitations on the extent to which the trustee acts on your behalf, which we describe later under *Default, Remedies and Waiver of Default*.

Second, the trustee performs administrative duties for us, such as sending you interest payments and notices.

When we refer to the indenture or the trustee with respect to any debt securities, we mean the indenture under which those debt securities are issued and the trustee under that indenture.

Series of Debt Securities

We may issue as many distinct series of debt securities under either debt indenture as we wish. This section summarizes terms of the securities that apply generally to all series. The provisions of each indenture allow us not only to issue debt securities with terms different from those of debt securities previously issued under that indenture, but also to reopen a previously issued series of debt securities and issue additional debt securities of that series. We will describe most of the financial and other specific terms of your series, whether it be a series of the senior debt securities or subordinated debt securities, in the prospectus supplement for that series. Those terms may vary from the terms described here.

As you read this section, please remember that the specific terms of your debt security as described in your prospectus supplement will supplement and, if applicable, may modify or replace the general terms described in this section. If there are any differences between your prospectus supplement and this prospectus, your prospectus supplement will control. Thus, the statements we make in this section may not apply to your debt security.

When we refer to a series of debt securities, we mean a series issued under the applicable indenture. When we refer to your prospectus supplement, we mean the prospectus supplement describing the specific terms of the debt security you purchase. The terms used in your prospectus supplement will have the meanings described in this prospectus, unless otherwise specified.

Amounts of Issuances

Neither debt indenture limits the aggregate amount of debt securities that we may issue or the number of series or the aggregate amount of any particular series. We may issue debt securities and other securities in amounts that exceed the total amount specified on the cover of this prospectus, at any time without your consent and without notifying you.

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The indentures and the debt securities do not limit our ability to incur other indebtedness or to issue other securities. Also, unless otherwise specified in your prospectus supplement, we are not subject to financial or similar restrictions by the terms of the debt securities.

Principal Amount, Stated Maturity and Maturity

The principal amount of a debt security means the principal amount payable at its stated maturity, unless that amount is not determinable, in which case the principal amount of a debt security is its face amount.

The term *stated maturity* with respect to any debt security means the day on which the principal amount of your debt security is scheduled to become due. The principal may become due sooner, by reason of redemption or acceleration after a default or otherwise in accordance with the terms of the debt security. The day on which the principal actually becomes due, whether at the stated maturity or earlier, is called the *maturity* of the principal.

We also use the terms *stated maturity* and *maturity* to refer to the days when other payments become due. For example, we may refer to a regular interest payment date when an installment of interest is scheduled to become due as the *stated maturity* of that installment. When we refer to the *stated maturity* or the *maturity* of a debt security without specifying a particular payment, we mean the stated maturity or maturity, as the case may be, of the principal.

Specific Terms of Debt Securities

Your prospectus supplement will describe the specific terms of your debt security, which will include some or all of the following:

whether it is a senior debt security or a subordinated debt security;

any limit on the total principal amount of the debt securities of the same series;

the stated maturity;

the currency or currencies for principal and interest, if not U.S. dollars;

the price at which we originally issue your debt security, expressed as a percentage of the principal amount, and the original issue date;

whether your debt security is a fixed rate debt security, a floating rate debt security or an indexed debt security;

if your debt security is a fixed rate debt security, the yearly rate at which your debt security will bear interest, if any, and the interest payment dates;

if your debt security is a floating rate debt security, the interest rate basis; any applicable index currency or maturity, spread or spread multiplier or initial, maximum or minimum rate; the interest reset, determination, calculation and payment dates; the day count used to calculate interest payments for any period; and the calculation agent;

if your debt security is an indexed debt security, the principal amount, if any, we will pay you at maturity, interest payment dates, the amount of interest, if any, we will pay you on an interest payment date or the formula we will use to calculate these amounts, if any, and the terms on which your debt security will be

exchangeable for or payable in cash, securities or other property;

if your debt security may be converted into or exercised or exchanged for common or preferred stock or other securities of Houston Exploration or debt or equity securities of one or more third parties, the terms on which conversion, exercise or exchange may occur, including whether conversion, exercise or exchange is mandatory, at the option of the holder or at our option, the period during which conversion, exercise or exchange may occur, the initial conversion, exercise or exchange price or rate and the circumstances or manner in which the amount of common or preferred stock or other securities issuable upon conversion, exercise or exchange may be adjusted;

if your debt security is also an original issue discount debt security, the yield to maturity;

if applicable, the circumstances under which your debt security may be redeemed at our option or repaid at the holder's option before the stated maturity, including any redemption commencement date, repayment date(s), redemption price(s) and redemption period(s);

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the authorized denominations, if other than \$1,000 and integral multiples of \$1,000;

the depository for your debt security, if other than DTC, and any circumstances under which the holder may request securities in non-global form, if we choose not to issue your debt security in book-entry form only;

if applicable, the circumstances under which we will pay additional amounts on any debt securities held by a person who is not a United States person for tax purposes and under which we can redeem the debt securities if we have to pay additional amounts;

the names and duties of any co-trustees, depositories, authenticating agents, paying agents, transfer agents or registrars for your debt security; and

any other terms of your debt security, which could be different from those described in this prospectus.

Governing Law

The debt indentures and the debt securities will be governed by New York law.

Form of Debt Securities

We will generally issue each debt security in registered form, without coupons, unless we specify otherwise in the applicable prospectus supplement. In addition, we will issue each debt security in global i.e., book-entry form only, unless we specify otherwise in the applicable prospectus supplement. Debt securities in book-entry form will be represented by a global security registered in the name of a depository, which will be the holder of all the debt securities represented by the global security. Those who own beneficial interests in a global debt security will do so through participants in the depository's securities clearance system, and the rights of these indirect owners will be governed solely by the applicable procedures of the depository and its participants. References to holders in this section mean those who own debt securities registered in their own names, on the books that we or the trustee maintain for this purpose, and not those who own beneficial interests in debt securities registered in street name or in debt securities issued in book-entry form through one or more depositories.

Unless otherwise indicated in the prospectus supplement, the following is a summary of the depository arrangements applicable to debt securities issued in global form and for which The Depository Trust Company (DTC) acts as depository.

Each global debt security will be deposited with, or on behalf of, DTC, as depository, or its nominee, and registered in the name of a nominee of DTC. Except under the limited circumstances described below, global debt securities are not exchangeable for definitive certificated debt securities.

Ownership of beneficial interests in a global debt security is limited to institutions that have accounts with DTC or its nominee, or persons that may hold interests through those participants. In addition, ownership of beneficial interests by participants in a global debt security will be evidenced only by, and the transfer of that ownership interest will be effected only through, records maintained by DTC or its nominee for a global debt security. Ownership of beneficial interests in a global debt security by persons that hold those interests through participants will be evidenced only by, and the transfer of that ownership interest within that participant will be effected only through, records maintained by that participant. DTC has no knowledge of the actual beneficial owners of the debt securities. Beneficial owners will not receive written confirmation from DTC of their purchase, but beneficial owners are expected to receive written confirmations providing details of the transaction, as well as periodic statements of their holdings, from the participants through which the beneficial owners entered the transaction. The laws of some jurisdictions require that certain purchasers of securities take physical delivery of securities they purchase in definitive

form. These laws may impair your ability to transfer beneficial interests in a global debt security.

We will make payment of principal of, and interest on, debt securities represented by a global debt security registered in the name of or held by DTC or its nominee to DTC or its nominee, as the case may be, as the registered owner and holder of the global debt security representing those debt securities. DTC has advised us that upon receipt of any payment of principal of, or interest on, a global debt security, DTC immediately will credit accounts of

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participants on its book-entry registration and transfer system with payments in amounts proportionate to their respective interests in the principal amount of that global debt security, as shown in the records of DTC. Payments by participants to owners of beneficial interests in a global debt security held through those participants will be governed by standing instructions and customary practices, as is now the case with securities held for the accounts of customers in bearer form or registered in street name, and will be the sole responsibility of those participants, subject to any statutory or regulatory requirements that may be in effect from time to time.

Neither we, any trustee nor any of our respective agents will be responsible for any aspect of the records of DTC, any nominee or any participant relating to, or payments made on account of, beneficial interests in a permanent global debt security or for maintaining, supervising or reviewing any of the records of DTC, any nominee or any participant relating to such beneficial interests.

A global debt security is exchangeable for definitive debt securities registered in the name of, and a transfer of a global debt security may be registered to, any person other than DTC or its nominee, only if:

DTC notifies us that it is unwilling, unable or no longer qualified to continue as depository for that global security and we do not appoint another institution to act as depository within 60 days;

we notify the trustee that we wish to terminate that global security; or

an event of default has occurred with regard to these debt securities and has not been cured or waived.

Any global debt security that is exchangeable pursuant to the preceding sentence will be exchangeable in whole for definitive debt securities in registered form, of like tenor and of an equal aggregate principal amount as the global debt security, in denominations specified in the applicable prospectus supplement, if other than \$1,000 and integral multiples of \$1,000. The definitive debt securities will be registered by the registrar in the name or names instructed by DTC. We expect that these instructions may be based upon directions received by DTC from its participants with respect to ownership of beneficial interests in the global debt security.

Except as provided above, owners of the beneficial interests in a global debt security will not be entitled to receive physical delivery of debt securities in definitive form and will not be considered the holders of debt securities for any purpose under the indentures. No global debt security shall be exchangeable except for another global debt security of like denomination and tenor to be registered in the name of DTC or its nominee. Accordingly, each person owning a beneficial interest in a global debt security must rely on the procedures of DTC and, if that person is not a participant, on the procedures of the participant through which that person owns its interest, to exercise any rights of a holder under the global debt security or the indentures.

We understand that, under existing industry practices, in the event that we request any action of holders, or an owner of a beneficial interest in a global debt security desires to give or take any action that a holder is entitled to give or take under the debt securities or the indentures, DTC would authorize the participants holding the relevant beneficial interests to give or take that action. Additionally, those participants would authorize beneficial owners owning through those participants to give or take that action or would otherwise act upon the instructions of beneficial owners owning through them.

DTC has advised us as follows:

DTC is:

a limited-purpose trust company organized under the New York Banking Law,

a banking organization within the meaning of the New York Banking Law,

a member of the Federal Reserve System,

a clearing corporation within the meaning of the New York Uniform Commercial Code, and

a clearing agency registered under Section 17A of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

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DTC was created to hold securities of its participants and to facilitate the clearance and settlement of securities transactions among its participants in those securities through electronic book-entry changes in accounts of the participants, thereby eliminating the need for physical movement of securities certificates.

DTC's participants include securities brokers and dealers, banks, trust companies, clearing corporations and certain other organizations.

DTC is owned by a number of its participants and by the New York Stock Exchange, Inc., the American Stock Exchange, Inc. and the National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc.

Access to DTC's book-entry system is also available to others, such as banks, brokers, dealers and trust companies, that clear through or maintain a custodial relationship with a participant, either directly or indirectly.

The rules applicable to DTC and its participants are on file with the SEC.

Redemption and Repayment

If there are any provisions regarding redemption and repayment applicable to your debt security, we will describe them in your prospectus supplement.

We or our affiliates may purchase debt securities from investors who are willing to sell from time to time, either in the open market at prevailing prices or in private transactions at negotiated prices. Debt securities that we or they purchase may, at our discretion, be held, resold or canceled.

Mergers and Similar Transactions

We are generally permitted under the indenture for the relevant series to merge or consolidate with another corporation or other entity. We are also permitted under the indenture for the relevant series to sell all or substantially all of our assets to another corporation or other entity. With regard to any series of debt securities, however, we may not take any of these actions unless all the following conditions are met:

If the successor entity in the transaction is not Houston Exploration the successor entity must be organized as a corporation, partnership or trust and must expressly assume our obligations under the debt securities of that series and the indenture with respect to that series. The successor entity may be organized under the laws of any jurisdiction, whether in the United States or elsewhere.

Immediately after the transaction, no default under the debt securities of that series has occurred and is continuing. For this purpose, default under the debt securities of that series means an event of default with respect to that series or any event that would be an event of default with respect to that series if the requirements for giving us default notice and for our default having to continue for a specific period of time were disregarded. We describe these matters below under Default, Remedies and Waiver of Default.

If the conditions described above are satisfied with respect to the debt securities of any series, we will not need to obtain the approval of the holders of those debt securities in order to merge or consolidate or to sell our assets. Also, these conditions will apply only if we wish to merge or consolidate with another entity or sell all or substantially all of our assets to another entity. We will not need to satisfy these conditions if we enter into other types of transactions, including any transaction in which we acquire the stock or assets of another entity, any transaction that involves a change of control of Houston Exploration but in which we do not merge or consolidate and any transaction in which we sell less than substantially all our assets.

If we sell all or substantially all of our assets, we will be released from all our liabilities and obligations under the debt securities of any series and the indenture with respect to that series. Also, if we merge, consolidate or sell our assets substantially as an entirety and the successor is a non-U.S. entity, neither we nor any successor would have any obligation to compensate you for any resulting adverse tax consequences relating to your debt securities.

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Subordination Provisions

Holders of subordinated debt securities should recognize that contractual provisions in the subordinated debt indenture may prohibit us from making payments on those securities. Subordinated debt securities are subordinate and junior in right of payment, to the extent and in the manner stated in the subordinated debt indenture, to all of our senior debt, as defined in the subordinated debt indenture, including all debt securities we have issued and will issue under the senior debt indenture.

The subordinated debt indenture defines *senior debt* as:

our indebtedness under or in respect of our credit agreement, whether for principal, interest (including interest accruing after the filing of a petition initiating any proceeding pursuant to any bankruptcy law, whether or not the claim for such interest is allowed as a claim in such proceeding), reimbursement obligations, fees, commissions, expenses, indemnities or other amounts; and

any other indebtedness permitted under the terms of that indenture, unless the instrument under which such indebtedness is incurred expressly provides that it is on a parity with or subordinated in right of payment to the subordinated debt securities.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, *senior debt* will not include: (i) equity interests; (ii) any liability for taxes; (iii) any indebtedness to any of our subsidiaries or affiliates; (iv) any trade payables; or (v) any indebtedness incurred in violation of the subordinated debt indenture.

We may modify the subordination provisions, including the definition of *senior debt*, with respect to one or more series of subordinated debt securities. Such modifications will be set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement.

The subordinated debt indenture provides that, unless all principal of and any premium or interest on the senior debt has been paid in full, no payment or other distribution may be made in respect of any subordinated debt securities in the following circumstances:

in the event of any insolvency or bankruptcy proceedings, or any receivership, liquidation, reorganization, assignment for creditors or other similar proceedings or events involving us or our assets;

(a) in the event and during the continuation of any default in the payment of principal, premium or interest on any senior indebtedness beyond any applicable grace period or (b) in the event that any event of default with respect to any senior indebtedness has occurred and is continuing, permitting the holders of that senior indebtedness (or a trustee) to accelerate the maturity of that senior indebtedness, whether or not the maturity is in fact accelerated (unless, in the case of (a) or (b), the payment default or event of default has been cured or waived or ceased to exist and any related acceleration has been rescinded) or (c) in the event that any judicial proceeding is pending with respect to a payment default or event of default described in (a) or (b); or

in the event that any subordinated debt securities have been declared due and payable before their stated maturity.

If the trustee under the subordinated debt indenture or any holders of the subordinated debt securities receive any payment or distribution that is prohibited under the subordination provisions, then the trustee or the holders will have to repay that money to the holders of the senior debt.

Even if the subordination provisions prevent us from making any payment when due on the subordinated debt securities of any series, we will be in default on our obligations under that series if we do not make the payment when due. This means that the trustee under the subordinated debt indenture and the holders of that series can take action

against us, but they will not receive any money until the claims of the holders of senior debt have been fully satisfied.

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The subordinated debt indenture allows the holders of senior indebtedness to obtain a court order requiring us and any holder of subordinated debt securities to comply with the subordination provisions.

Defeasance or Covenant Defeasance

If there are any provisions regarding defeasance or covenant defeasance applicable to your debt security, we will describe them in your prospectus supplement.

Default, Remedies and Waiver of Default

You will have special rights if an event of default with respect to your series of debt securities occurs and is continuing, as described in this subsection.

Events of Default

Unless your prospectus supplement says otherwise, when we refer to an event of default with respect to any series of debt securities, we mean any of the following:

we do not pay the principal or any premium on any debt security of that series on the due date;

we do not pay interest on any debt security of that series within 30 days after the due date;

we do not deposit a sinking fund payment with regard to any debt security of that series on the due date, but only if the payment is required under provisions described in the applicable prospectus supplement;

we remain in breach of our covenants regarding mergers or sales of substantially all of our assets, or any other covenant we make in the indenture for the benefit of the relevant series, for 60 days after we receive a notice of default stating that we are in breach and requiring us to remedy the breach. The notice must be sent by the trustee or the holders of at least 10% in principal amount of the relevant series of debt securities;

we file for bankruptcy or other events of bankruptcy, insolvency or reorganization relating to Houston Exploration occur. Those events must arise under U.S. federal or state law, unless we merge, consolidate or sell our assets as described above and the successor firm is a non-U.S. entity. If that happens, then those events must arise under U.S. federal or state law or the law of the jurisdiction in which the successor firm is legally organized; or

if the applicable prospectus supplement states that any additional event of default applies to the series, that event of default occurs.

Remedies if an Event of Default Occurs

If you are the holder of a subordinated debt security, all the remedies available upon the occurrence of an event of default under the subordinated debt indenture will be subject to the restrictions on the subordinated debt securities described above under Subordination Provisions.

If an event of default has occurred with respect to any series of debt securities and has not been cured or waived, the trustee or the holders of not less than 25% in principal amount of all debt securities of that series may declare the entire principal amount of the debt securities of that series to be due immediately. If the event of default occurs because of events in bankruptcy, insolvency or reorganization relating to Houston Exploration, the entire principal amount of the debt securities of that series will be automatically accelerated, without any action by the trustee or any

holder.

Each of the situations described above is called an acceleration of the maturity of the affected series of debt securities. If the maturity of any series is accelerated and a judgment for payment has not yet been obtained, the holders of a majority in principal amount of the debt securities of that series may cancel the acceleration for the entire series.

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If an event of default occurs, the trustee will have special duties. In that situation, the trustee will be obligated to use those of its rights and powers under the relevant indenture, and to use the same degree of care and skill in doing so, that a prudent person would use in that situation in conducting his or her own affairs.

Except as described in the prior paragraph, the trustee is not required to take any action under the relevant indenture at the request of any holders unless the holders offer the trustee reasonable protection from expenses and liability. This is called an indemnity. If the trustee is provided with an indemnity reasonably satisfactory to it, the holders of a majority in principal amount of all debt securities of the relevant series may direct the time, method and place of conducting any lawsuit or other formal legal action seeking any remedy available to the trustee with respect to that series. These majority holders may also direct the trustee in performing any other action under the applicable indenture with respect to the debt securities of that series.

Before you bypass the trustee and bring your own lawsuit or other formal legal action or take other steps to enforce your rights or protect your interests relating to any debt security, all of the following must occur:

the holder of your debt security must give the trustee written notice that an event of default has occurred, and the event of default must not have been cured or waived;

the holders of not less than 25% in principal amount of all debt securities of your series must make a written request that the trustee take action because of the default, and they or other holders must offer to the trustee indemnity reasonably satisfactory to the trustee against the cost and other liabilities of taking that action;

the trustee must not have taken action for 60 days after the above steps have been taken; and

during those 60 days, the holders of a majority in principal amount of the debt securities of your series must not have given the trustee directions that are inconsistent with the written request of the holders of not less than 25% in principal amount of the debt securities of your series.

You are entitled at any time, however, to bring a lawsuit for the payment of money due on your debt security on or after its due date.

Book-entry and other indirect owners should consult their banks or brokers for information on how to give notice or direction to or make a request of the trustee and how to declare or cancel an acceleration of the maturity.

Waiver of Default

The holders of not less than a majority in principal amount of the debt securities of any series may waive a default for all debt securities of that series. If this happens, the default will be treated as if it has not occurred. No one can waive a payment default on your debt security, however, without the approval of the particular holder of that debt security.

Annual Information about Defaults to the Trustee

We will furnish to each trustee every year a written statement of two of our officers certifying that to their knowledge we are in compliance with the applicable indenture and the debt securities issued under it, or else specifying any default under the indenture.

Modifications and Waivers

There are four types of changes we can make to either debt indenture and the debt securities of any series issued under that indenture.

First, there are changes that cannot be made without the approval of each holder of a debt security affected by the change under a particular debt indenture, including, among others:

changing the stated maturity for any principal or interest payment on a debt security;

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reducing the principal amount, the amount payable on acceleration of the maturity after a default, the interest rate or the redemption price for a debt security;

changing the currency of any payment on a debt security;

changing the place of payment on a debt security;

impair a holder's right to sue for payment of any amount due on its debt security;

reducing the percentage in principal amount of the debt securities of any one or more affected series, taken separately or together, as applicable, the approval of whose holders is needed to change the indenture or those debt securities or waive our compliance with the applicable indenture or to waive defaults; and

changing the provisions of the applicable indenture dealing with modification and waiver in any other respect, except to increase any required percentage referred to above or to add to the provisions that cannot be changed or waived without approval of the holder of each affected debt security.

The second type of change does not require any approval by holders of the debt securities of an affected series. These changes are limited to clarifications and changes that would not adversely affect the debt securities of that series in any material respect. Nor do we need any approval to make changes that affect only debt securities to be issued under the applicable indenture after the changes take effect. We may also make changes or obtain waivers that do not adversely affect a particular debt security, even if they affect other debt securities. In those cases, we do not need to obtain the approval of the holder of the unaffected debt security; we need only obtain any required approvals from the holders of the affected debt securities.

Third, we may not amend the subordinated debt indenture to alter the subordination of any outstanding subordinated debt securities without the written consent of each holder of senior debt then outstanding who would be adversely affected. In addition, we may not modify the subordination provisions of the subordinated debt indenture in a manner that would adversely affect the subordinated debt securities of any one or more series then outstanding in any material respect, without the consent of the holders of a majority in aggregate principal amount of all affected series then outstanding, voting together as one class (and also of any affected series that by its terms is entitled to vote separately as a series, as described below).

Any other change to a particular debt indenture and the debt securities issued under that indenture would require the following approval:

If the change affects only the debt securities of a particular series, it must be approved by the holders of a majority in principal amount of the debt securities of that series.

If the change affects the debt securities of more than one series of debt securities issued under the applicable indenture, it must be approved by the holders of a majority in principal amount of all series affected by the change, with the debt securities of all the affected series voting together as one class for this purpose (and of any affected series that by its terms is entitled to vote separately as a series, as described below).

If the terms of a series entitle the holders of debt securities of such series to vote as separate class on any change, it must be approved as required under those terms.

The same majority approval would be required for us to obtain a waiver of any of our covenants in either indenture. Our covenants include the promises we make about merging or selling substantially all of our assets, which we describe above under Mergers and Similar Transactions. If the holders approve a waiver of a covenant, we will not have to comply with it. The holders, however, cannot approve a waiver of any provision in a particular debt security,

or in the applicable indenture as it affects that debt security, that we cannot change without the approval of the holder of that debt security as described above, unless that holder approves the waiver.

Only holders of outstanding debt securities of the applicable series will be eligible to take any action under the applicable debt indenture, such as giving a notice of default, declaring an acceleration, approving any change or waiver or giving the trustee an instruction with respect to debt securities of that series. Also, we will count only outstanding debt securities in determining whether the various percentage requirements for taking action have been

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met. Any debt securities owned by us or any of our affiliates or surrendered for cancellation or for payment or redemption of which money has been set aside in trust are not deemed to be outstanding.

In some situations, we may follow special rules in calculating the principal amount of a debt security that is to be treated as outstanding for the purposes described above. This may happen, for example, if the principal amount is payable in a non-U.S. dollar currency, increases over time or is not to be fixed until maturity.

We will generally be entitled to set any day as a record date for the purpose of determining the holders that are entitled to take action under either indenture. In certain limited circumstances, only the trustee will be entitled to set a record date for action by holders. If we or the trustee set a record date for an approval or other action to be taken by holders, that vote or action may be taken only by persons or entities who are holders on the record date and must be taken during the period that we specify for this purpose, or that the trustee specifies if it sets the record date. We or the trustee, as applicable, may shorten or lengthen this period from time to time. This period, however, may not extend beyond the 180th day after the record date for the action. In addition, record dates for any global debt security may be set in accordance with procedures established by the depositary from time to time. Accordingly, record dates for global debt securities may differ from those for other debt securities.

Form, Exchange and Transfer

If any debt securities cease to be issued in registered global form, they will be issued:

only in fully registered form;

without interest coupons; and

unless we indicate otherwise in your prospectus supplement, in denominations of \$1,000 and integral multiples of \$1,000.

Holders may exchange their debt securities for debt securities of smaller denominations or combined into fewer debt securities of larger denominations, as long as the total principal amount is not changed. You may not exchange your debt securities for securities of a different series or having different terms, unless your prospectus supplement says you may.

Holders may exchange or transfer their debt securities at the office of the trustee. They may also replace lost, stolen, destroyed or mutilated debt securities at that office. We have appointed the trustee to act as our agent for registering debt securities in the names of holders and transferring and replacing debt securities. We may appoint another entity to perform these functions or perform them ourselves.

Holders will not be required to pay a service charge to transfer or exchange their debt securities, but they may be required to pay for any tax or other governmental charge associated with the exchange or transfer. The transfer or exchange, and any replacement, will be made only if our transfer agent is satisfied with the holder's proof of legal ownership. The transfer agent may require an indemnity before replacing any debt securities.

If we have designated additional transfer agents for your debt security, they will be named in your prospectus supplement. We may appoint additional transfer agents or cancel the appointment of any particular transfer agent. We may also approve a change in the office through which any transfer agent acts.

If the debt securities of any series are redeemable and we redeem less than all those debt securities, we may block the transfer or exchange of those debt securities during the period beginning 15 days before the day we mail the notice of redemption and ending on the day of that mailing, in order to freeze the list of holders to prepare the mailing. We

may also refuse to register transfers of or exchange any debt security selected for redemption, except that we will continue to permit transfers and exchanges of the unredeemed portion of any debt security being partially redeemed.

If a debt security is issued as a global debt security, only DTC or other depositary will be entitled to transfer and exchange the debt security as described in this subsection, since the depositary will be the sole holder of the debt security.

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The rules for exchange described above apply to exchange of debt securities for other debt securities of the same series and kind. If a debt security is convertible, exercisable or exchangeable into or for a different kind of security, such as one that we have not issued, or for other property, the rules governing that type of conversion, exercise or exchange will be described in the applicable prospectus supplement.

Payments

We will pay interest, principal and other amounts payable with respect to the debt securities of any series to the holders of record of those debt securities as of the record dates and otherwise in the manner specified below or in the prospectus supplement for that series.

We will make payments on a global debt security in accordance with the applicable policies of the depositary as in effect from time to time. Under those policies, we will pay directly to the depositary, or its nominee, and not to any indirect owners who own beneficial interests in the global debt security. An indirect owner's right to receive those payments will be governed by the rules and practices of the depositary and its participants.

We will make payments on a debt security in non-global, registered form as follows. We will pay interest that is due on an interest payment date by check mailed on the interest payment date to the holder at his or her address shown on the trustee's records as of the close of business on the regular record date. We will make all other payments by check at the paying agent described below, against surrender of the debt security. All payments by check will be made in next-day funds i.e., funds that become available on the day after the check is cashed.

Alternatively, if a non-global debt security has a face amount of at least \$1,000,000 and the holder asks us to do so, we will pay any amount that becomes due on the debt security by wire transfer of immediately available funds to an account at a bank in New York City, on the due date. To request wire payment, the holder must give the paying agent appropriate wire transfer instructions at least five business days before the requested wire payment is due. In the case of any interest payment due on an interest payment date, the instructions must be given by the person or entity who is the holder on the relevant regular record date. In the case of any other payment, payment will be made only after the debt security is surrendered to the paying agent. Any wire instructions, once properly given, will remain in effect unless and until new instructions are given in the manner described above.

Book-entry and other indirect owners should consult their banks or brokers for information on how they will receive payments on their debt securities.

Paying Agents

We may appoint one or more financial institutions to act as our paying agents, at whose designated offices debt securities in non-global entry form may be surrendered for payment at their maturity. We call each of those offices a paying agent. We may add, replace or terminate paying agents from time to time. We may also choose to act as our own paying agent. We will specify in the prospectus supplement for your debt security the initial location of paying agent for that debt security. We must notify the trustee of changes in the paying agents.

Notices

Notices to be given to holders of a global debt security will be given only to the depositary, in accordance with its applicable policies as in effect from time to time. Notices to be given to holders of debt securities not in global form will be sent by mail to the respective addresses of the holders as they appear in the trustee's records, and will be deemed given when mailed. Neither the failure to give any notice to a particular holder, nor any defect in a notice given to a particular holder, will affect the sufficiency of any notice given to another holder.

Book-entry and other indirect owners should consult their banks or brokers for information on how they will receive notices.

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Our Relationship With The Trustee

The prospectus supplement for your debt security will describe any material relationships we may have with the trustee with respect to that debt security.

The same financial institution may initially serve as the trustee for our senior debt securities and subordinated debt securities. Consequently, if an actual or potential event of default occurs with respect to any of these securities, the trustee may be considered to have a conflicting interest for purposes of the Trust Indenture Act of 1939. In that case, the trustee may be required to resign under one or more of the indentures, and we would be required to appoint a successor trustee. For this purpose, a potential event of default means an event that would be an event of default if the requirements for giving us default notice or for the default having to exist for a specific period of time were disregarded.

DESCRIPTION OF CAPITAL STOCK

General

As of the date of this prospectus, we are authorized to issue up to 55,000,000 shares of stock, including up to 50,000,000 shares of common stock and up to 5,000,000 shares of preferred stock. As of October 27, 2004, we had 28,229,624 shares of common stock and no shares of preferred stock outstanding. As of that date, we also had options outstanding and exercisable for approximately 601,079 shares of common stock.

The following is a summary of the key terms and provisions of our equity securities. You should refer to the applicable provisions of our restated certificate of incorporation, restated bylaws, the Delaware General Corporation law and the documents we have incorporated by reference for a complete statement of the terms and rights of our capital stock.

Section 203 of the Delaware General Corporation Law

We are a Delaware corporation and are subject to Section 203 of the Delaware General Corporation Law (the DGCL). Generally, Section 203 prohibits a publicly-held Delaware corporation from engaging in a business combination with an interested stockholder for a period of three years after the date of the transaction in which the person became an interested stockholder, unless (1) prior to that date, either the business combination or the transaction that resulted in the stockholder becoming an interested stockholder is approved by the board of directors of the corporation, (2) upon consummation of the transaction that resulted in the stockholder becoming an interested stockholder, the interested stockholder owns at least 85% of the outstanding voting stock, or (3) on or after such date, the business combination is approved by the board of directors of the corporation and by the affirmative vote of at least 66% of the outstanding voting stock that is not owned by the interested stockholder. A business combination includes mergers, asset sales and other transactions resulting in a financial benefit to the interested stockholder. An interested stockholder is a person who, together with affiliates and associates, owns, or, within three years, did own, 15% or more of the corporation's outstanding voting stock. Our restated certificate of incorporation provides that Section 203 of the DGCL will not apply to restrict a business combination between us and an interested stockholder if (1) the business combination was approved by our board of directors prior to the time that such stockholder became an interested stockholder or (2) the stockholder became an interested stockholder as a result of, and at or prior to the effective time of, a transaction which was approved by our board of directors prior to the time such stockholder became an interested stockholder.

Rights Plan

On August 12, 2004, we adopted a stockholder rights plan designed to assure that the Company's stockholders receive fair and equal treatment in the event of a proposed takeover of the Company and to protect against abusive or coercive takeover tactics that are not in the best interest of the Company or its stockholders. To implement the rights plan, the Board of Directors declared a dividend of one preferred share purchase right for each outstanding share of our common stock to stockholders of record as of the close of business on August 23, 2004, and directed the issuance of one preferred share purchase right with respect to each share of our common stock that shall become

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outstanding thereafter until the rights become exercisable or they expire as described below. Each right initially represents a contingent right to purchase, under certain circumstances, one one-thousandth of a share of our Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock, par value \$.01 per share, at an initial exercise price of \$275.00 per one one-thousandth of a share, subject to adjustment under certain circumstances. The rights will become exercisable and trade independently from our common stock upon the public announcement of the acquisition by a person or group of 10% or more of our common stock, or ten days after commencement of a tender or exchange offer that would result in the acquisition of 10% or more of our common stock (or, in the case of KeySpan and its affiliates, more than 23% of our common stock).

Each share purchased upon exercise of the rights will be entitled to a minimum quarterly preferential dividend payment of the greater of (i) \$10.00 per share and (ii) an amount equal to 1,000 times the dividend declared per share of common stock. Each share will be entitled to 1,000 votes, voting together with the common stock. In the event of our liquidation, each share of the Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock will be entitled to a minimum preferential payment of the greater of (a) \$10.00 per share (plus any accrued but unpaid dividends) and (b) an amount equal to 1,000 times the payment made per share of common stock.

If we are acquired in a merger or other business combination transaction after a person or group has acquired 10% or more of our common stock, each right will entitle its holder to purchase, at the rights exercise price, that number of the acquiring company's shares of common stock having a market value of twice the right's exercise price. In addition, if a person or group acquires 10% or more of our common stock, each right will entitle its holder (other than the acquiring person or group) to purchase, at the right's exercise price, a number of fractional shares of the Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock or shares of our common stock having a market value of twice the right's exercise price.

The rights expire on August 12, 2014, unless redeemed earlier by our Board of Directors. The Board of Directors can redeem the rights at a price of \$.01 per right at any time before the rights become exercisable, and thereafter only in limited circumstances.

Limitation on Changes in Control

Certain of the provisions of our restated certificate of incorporation and restated bylaws and the provisions of Section 203 of the DGCL could have the effect of delaying, deferring or preventing a change in control or the removal of our existing management or deterring potential acquirors from making an offer to our stockholders. This could be the case even if a majority of our stockholders might benefit from such a change in control or offer. In addition, the issuance of shares of preferred stock, or the issuance of rights to purchase shares of preferred stock, could be used to discourage an unsolicited acquisition proposal. For instance, the issuance of a series of preferred stock might impede a business combination by including voting rights that would require the approval of a percentage of the preferred stockholders. In addition, under certain circumstances, the issuance of preferred stock could adversely affect the voting power of the holders of common stock.

Provisions of the Restated Certificate of Incorporation and Restated Bylaws

Our restated certificate of incorporation provides that stockholders may not act by written consent in lieu of a meeting. The restated certificate of incorporation further provides that the number of directors will not be fewer than three nor more than 15. An amendment to our restated certificate of incorporation relating to the composition of the board of directors, an amendment of our bylaws or limitations on the liability of our directors, requires the vote of at least 66% of our stockholders entitled to vote in an election of directors, voting together as a single class. An amendment to our bylaws by our stockholders requires the affirmative vote of at least 66% of our stockholders entitled to vote in an election of directors, voting together as a single class.

Common Stock

Voting Rights. Each holder of our common stock is entitled to one vote per share. Subject to any rights of the holders of any series of preferred stock pursuant to applicable law or the provision of the certificate of designations creating that series, all voting rights are vested in the holders of shares of common stock. Holders of shares of

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common stock have noncumulative voting rights, which means that the holders of more than 50% of the shares voting for the election of directors can elect all of the directors, and the holders of the remaining shares voting for the election of directors will not be able to elect any directors.

Dividends. Dividends may be paid to the holders of common stock when, as and if declared by the board of directors out of funds legally available for their payment, subject to the rights of holders of any preferred stock.

Rights upon Liquidation. In the event of our voluntary or involuntary liquidation, dissolution or winding up, the holders of our common stock will be entitled to share equally, in proportion to the number of shares of our common stock held by them, in any of our assets available for distribution after the payment in full of all debts and distributions and after the holders of all series of outstanding preferred stock, if any, have received their liquidation preferences in full.

Miscellaneous. The issued and outstanding shares of our common stock are fully paid and nonassessable. Holders of shares of common stock are not entitled to preemptive rights. Shares of common stock are not redeemable or convertible into shares of any other class of capital stock. The Bank of New York is the transfer agent and registrar for our common stock.

Preferred Stock and Depositary Shares

We may issue shares of our preferred stock in one or more series. We will determine the dividend, voting, conversion and other rights of the series being offered and the terms and conditions relating to its offering and sale at the time of the offer and sale. We also may issue fractional shares of preferred stock that will be represented by depositary shares and depositary receipts.

Description of Preferred Stock

Our restated certificate of incorporation authorizes our board of directors or a committee of our board of directors to cause preferred stock to be issued in one or more series without action by our stockholders. Our board of directors is authorized to issue up to 5,000,000 shares of preferred stock and can determine the number of shares of each series, and the rights, preferences and limitations of each series. We may amend our certificate of incorporation to increase the number of authorized shares of preferred stock in a manner permitted by the restated certificate of incorporation and the DGCL. As of the date of this prospectus, we have no shares of preferred stock outstanding.

The particular terms of any series of preferred stock being offered by us under this prospectus will be described in the prospectus supplement relating to that series of preferred stock. Those terms may include:

the number of shares of the series of preferred stock being offered;

the title and liquidation preference per share of that series of the preferred stock;

the purchase price of the preferred stock;

the dividend rate or method for determining the dividend rate;

the dates on which dividends will be paid;

whether dividends on that series of preferred stock will be cumulative or non-cumulative and, if cumulative, the dates from which dividends will accumulate;

any redemption or sinking fund provisions applicable to that series of preferred stock;

any conversion or exchange provisions applicable to that series of preferred stock;

whether we have elected to offer depositary shares with respect to that series of preferred stock; or

any additional dividend, liquidation, redemption, sinking fund or other preferences, rights or restrictions applicable to that series of preferred stock.

If the terms of any series of preferred stock being offered differ from the terms set forth below, those terms will also be disclosed in the prospectus supplement relating to that series of preferred stock. You should refer to the certificate of designations relating to the series of the preferred stock for the complete terms of that preferred stock.

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The certificate of designations for any series of preferred stock will be filed with the SEC promptly after the offering of that series of preferred stock.

The preferred stock, when issued, will be fully paid and nonassessable. Unless otherwise specified in the prospectus supplement, in the event we liquidate, dissolve or wind-up our business, each series of preferred stock will have the same rank as to dividends and distributions as each other series of the preferred stock we may issue in the future. Holders of preferred stock will have no preemptive rights to subscribe for or purchase shares of our capital stock.

Dividend Rights. Holders of preferred stock of each series will be entitled to receive, when, as and if declared by our board of directors, cash dividends at the rates and on the dates set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement. Dividend rates may be fixed or variable or both. Different series of preferred stock may be entitled to dividends at different dividend rates or based on different methods of determination. Each dividend will be payable to the holders of record as they appear on our stock books, or, if applicable, the records of the depository referred to below under *Depository Shares* on record dates determined by our the board of directors. Dividends on any series of the preferred stock may be cumulative or non-cumulative, as specified in the applicable prospectus supplement. If the board of directors fails to declare a dividend on any series of preferred stock for which dividends are non-cumulative, then the right to receive that dividend will be lost, and we will have no obligation to pay the dividend for that dividend period, whether or not dividends are declared for any future dividend period.

We will not pay or declare full dividends on any series of preferred stock, unless we have or are contemporaneously declaring and paying full dividends for the dividend period commencing after the immediately preceding dividend payment date (and cumulative dividends still owing, if any) on all other series of preferred stock which have the same rank as, or rank senior to, that series of preferred stock. When those dividends are not paid in full, dividends will be declared pro rata, so that the amount of dividends declared per share on that series of preferred stock and on each other series of preferred stock having the same rank as, or ranking senior to, that series of preferred stock will in all cases bear to each other the same ratio that accrued dividends per share on that series of preferred stock and the other preferred stock bear to each other. In addition, generally, unless full dividends, including cumulative dividends still owing, if any, on all outstanding shares of any series of preferred stock have been paid, no dividends will be declared or paid on our common stock and generally we may not redeem or purchase any common stock. No interest, or sum of money in lieu of interest, will be paid in connection with any dividend payment or payments which may be in arrears.

The amount of dividends payable for each dividend period will be computed by annualizing the applicable dividend rate and dividing by the number of dividend periods in a year, except that the amount of dividends payable for the initial dividend period or any period shorter than a full dividend period shall be computed on the basis of a 360-day year consisting of twelve 30-day months and, for any period less than a full month, the actual number of days elapsed in the period.

Rights Upon Liquidation. In the event we liquidate, dissolve or wind-up our affairs, either voluntarily or involuntarily, the holders of each series of preferred stock will be entitled to receive liquidating distributions in the amount set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement relating to each series of preferred stock, plus an amount equal to accrued and unpaid dividends, if any, before any distribution of assets is made to the holders of common stock. If the amounts payable with respect to preferred stock of any series and any stock having the same rank as that series of preferred stock are not paid in full, the holders of preferred stock and of such other stock will share ratably in any such distribution of assets in proportion to the full respective preferential amounts to which they are entitled. After the holders of each series of preferred stock and any stock having the same rank as the preferred stock are paid in full, they will have no right or claim to any of our remaining assets. Neither the sale of all or substantially all our property or business nor a merger or consolidation by us with any other corporation will be considered a dissolution, liquidation or winding up by us of our business or affairs.

Redemption. Any series of preferred stock may be redeemable, in whole or in part, at our option. In addition, any series of preferred stock may be subject to mandatory redemption pursuant to a sinking fund. The redemption provisions that may apply to a series of preferred stock, including the redemption dates and the redemption prices for that series, will be set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement.

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If a series of preferred stock is subject to mandatory redemption, the applicable prospectus supplement will specify the year we can begin to redeem shares of the preferred stock, the number of shares of the preferred stock we can redeem each year, and the redemption price per share. We may pay the redemption price in cash, stock or in cash that we have received specifically from the sale of our capital stock, as specified in the prospectus supplement. If the redemption price is to be paid only from the proceeds of the sale of our capital stock, the terms of the series of preferred stock may also provide that, if no such capital stock is sold or if the amount of cash received is insufficient to pay in full the redemption price then due, the series of preferred stock will automatically be converted into shares of the applicable capital stock pursuant to conversion provisions specified in the prospectus supplement.

If fewer than all the outstanding shares of any series of preferred stock are to be redeemed, whether by mandatory or optional redemption, the board of directors will determine the method for selecting the shares to be redeemed, which may be by lot or pro rata or by any other method determined to be equitable. From and after the redemption date, dividends will cease to accrue on the shares of preferred stock called for redemption and all rights of the holders of those shares (except the right to receive the redemption price) will cease.

In the event that full dividends, including accrued but unpaid dividends, if any, have not been paid on any series of preferred stock, we may not redeem that series in part and we may not purchase or acquire any shares of that series of preferred stock, except by an offer made on the same terms to all holders of that series of preferred stock.

Conversion Rights. The applicable prospectus supplement will state the terms, if any, on which shares of a series of preferred stock are convertible into shares of common stock or another series of our preferred stock. As described under *Redemption* above, under certain circumstances, preferred stock may be mandatorily converted into common stock or another series of our preferred stock.

Voting Rights. Except as indicated below or in the applicable prospectus supplement, or except as expressly required by applicable law, the holders of preferred stock will not be entitled to vote. Except as indicated in the applicable prospectus supplement, in the event we issue full shares of any series of preferred stock, each share will be entitled to one vote on matters on which holders of that series of preferred stock are entitled to vote. However, as more fully described below under *Description of Depositary Shares*, if we issue depositary shares representing a fraction of a share of a series of preferred stock, each depositary share will, in effect, be entitled to that fraction of a vote, rather than a full vote. Because each full share of any series of preferred stock will be entitled to one vote, the voting power of that series will depend on the number of shares in that series, and not on the aggregate liquidation preference or initial offering price of the shares of that series of preferred stock.

Transfer Agent and Registrar. Unless otherwise indicated in the applicable prospectus supplement, The Bank of New York will be the transfer agent, registrar and dividend disbursement agent for the preferred stock and any depositary shares (see the description of depositary shares below). The registrar for the preferred stock will send notices to the holders of the preferred stock of any meetings at which such holders will have the right to elect directors or to vote on any other matter.

Description of Depositary Shares

General. We may, at our option, elect to offer fractional shares of preferred stock, rather than full shares of preferred stock. If we do, we will issue to the public receipts for depositary shares, and each of these depositary shares will represent a fraction (to be set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement) of a share of a particular series of preferred stock.

The shares of any series of preferred stock underlying the depositary shares will be deposited under a deposit agreement between us and a bank or trust company selected by us (the depositary). Subject to the terms of the deposit

agreement, each owner of a depositary share will be entitled, in proportion to the applicable fractional interest in shares of preferred stock underlying that depositary share, to all the rights and preferences of the preferred stock underlying that depositary share. Those rights include dividend, voting, redemption, conversion and liquidation rights.

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The depositary shares will be evidenced by depositary receipts issued pursuant to the deposit agreement. Depositary receipts will be issued to those persons who purchase the fractional interests in the preferred stock underlying the depositary shares, in accordance with the terms of the offering. Copies of the forms of deposit agreement and depositary receipt will be filed as exhibits to the registration statement of which this prospectus is a part. The following description is a summary of the material provisions of the deposit agreement, the depositary shares and the depositary receipts. It does not restate those agreements in their entirety.

Dividends and Other Distributions. The depositary will distribute all cash dividends or other cash distributions received in respect of the preferred stock to the record holders of depositary shares relating to that preferred stock in proportion to the number of depositary shares owned by those holders.

If there is a distribution other than in cash, the depositary will distribute property received by it to the record holders of depositary shares that are entitled to receive the distribution, unless the depositary determines that it is not feasible to make the distribution. If this occurs, the depositary may, with our approval, sell the property and distribute the net proceeds from the sale to the applicable holders.

Redemption of Depositary Shares. If a series of preferred stock underlying the depositary shares is subject to redemption, the depositary shares will be redeemed from the proceeds received by the depositary resulting from the redemption, in whole or in part, of that series of preferred stock held by the depositary. The redemption price per depositary share will be equal to the applicable fraction of the redemption price per share payable with respect to that series of the preferred stock. Whenever we redeem shares of preferred stock that are held by the depositary, the depositary will redeem, as of the same redemption date, the number of depositary shares representing the shares of preferred stock so redeemed. If fewer than all the depositary shares are to be redeemed, the depositary shares to be redeemed will be selected by lot or pro rata as determined by the depositary.

After the date fixed for redemption, the depositary shares called for redemption will no longer be outstanding, and all rights of the holders of those depositary shares will cease, except the right to receive any money, securities, or other property upon surrender to the depositary of the depositary receipts evidencing those depositary shares.

Voting the Preferred Stock. Upon receipt of notice of any meeting at which the holders of preferred stock are entitled to vote, the depositary will mail the information contained in the notice of meeting to the record holders of the depositary shares underlying that preferred stock. Each record holder of those depositary shares on the record date (which will be the same date as the record date for the preferred stock) will be entitled to instruct the depositary as to the exercise of the voting rights pertaining to the amount of the preferred stock underlying that holder's depositary shares. The depositary will try, as far as practicable, to vote the number of shares of preferred stock underlying those depositary shares in accordance with such instructions, and we will agree to take all action that may be deemed necessary by the depositary in order to enable the depositary to do so. The depositary will not vote the shares of preferred stock to the extent it does not receive specific instructions from the holders of depositary shares.

Amendment and Termination of the Depositary Agreement. The form of depositary receipt evidencing the depositary shares and any provision of the deposit agreement may be amended at any time by agreement between us and the depositary. However, any amendment that materially and adversely alters the rights of the holders of depositary shares will not be effective unless the amendment has been approved by the holders of at least a majority of the depositary shares then outstanding. The deposit agreement may be terminated by us or by the depositary only if (1) all outstanding depositary shares have been redeemed or (2) there has been a final distribution of the underlying preferred stock in connection with our liquidation, dissolution or winding up and the preferred stock has been distributed to the holders of depositary receipts.

Resignation and Removal of Depositary. The depositary may resign at any time by delivering a notice to us of its election to do so. We may remove the depositary at any time. Any such resignation or removal will take effect upon the appointment of a successor depositary and its acceptance of its appointment. The successor depositary must be appointed within 60 days after delivery of the notice of resignation or removal.

Miscellaneous. The depositary will forward to holders of depositary receipts all reports and communications from us that we deliver to the depositary and that we are required to furnish to the holders of the preferred stock.

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Neither we nor the depositary will be liable if either of us is prevented or delayed by law or any circumstance beyond our control in performing our respective obligations under the deposit agreement. Our obligations and those of the depositary will be limited to the performance in good faith of our respective duties under the deposit agreement. Neither we nor the depositary will be obligated to prosecute or defend any legal proceeding in respect of any depositary shares or preferred stock unless satisfactory indemnity is furnished. We and the depositary may rely upon written advice of counsel or accountants, or upon information provided by persons presenting preferred stock for deposit, holders of depositary receipts or other persons believed to be competent and on documents believed to be genuine.

Description of Permanent Global Preferred Securities

Certain series of the preferred stock or depositary shares may be issued as permanent global securities to be deposited with a depositary with respect to that series. Unless otherwise indicated in the prospectus supplement, the following is a summary of the depositary arrangements applicable to preferred stock or depositary receipts issued in permanent global form and for which DTC will act as the depositary (global preferred securities).

Each global preferred security will be deposited with, or on behalf of, DTC or its nominee and registered in the name of a nominee of DTC. Except under the limited circumstances described below, global preferred securities are not exchangeable for definitive certificated preferred stock or depositary receipts.

Ownership of beneficial interests in a global preferred security is limited to institutions that have accounts with DTC or its nominee (participants) or persons that may hold interests through participants. In addition, ownership of beneficial interests by participants in a global preferred security will be evidenced only by, and the transfer of that ownership interest will be effected only through, records maintained by DTC or its nominee for a global preferred security. Ownership of beneficial interests in a global preferred security by persons that hold through participants will be evidenced only by, and the transfer of that ownership interest within that participant will be effected only through, records maintained by that participant. DTC has no knowledge of the actual beneficial owners of the preferred stock or depositary shares, as the case may be, represented by a global preferred security. Beneficial owners will not receive written confirmation from DTC of their purchase, but beneficial owners are expected to receive written confirmations providing details of the transaction, as well as periodic statements of their holdings, from the participants through which the beneficial owners entered the transaction. The laws of some jurisdictions require that certain purchasers of securities take physical delivery of such securities in definitive form. Such laws may impair the ability to transfer beneficial interests in a global preferred security.

Payments on preferred stock and depositary shares represented by a global preferred security registered in the name of or held by DTC or its nominee will be made to DTC or its nominee, as the case may be, as the registered owner and holder of the global preferred security representing the preferred stock or depositary shares. We have been advised by DTC that upon receipt of any payment on a global preferred security, DTC will immediately credit accounts of participants on its book-entry registration and transfer system with payments in amounts proportionate to their respective beneficial interests in that global preferred security as shown in the records of DTC. Payments by participants to owners of beneficial interests in a global preferred security held through those participants will be governed by standing instructions and customary practices, as is now the case with securities held for the accounts of customers in bearer form or registered in street name, and will be the sole responsibility of those participants, subject to any statutory or regulatory requirements as may be in effect from time to time.

Neither we nor any of our agents will be responsible for any aspect of the records of DTC, any nominee or any participant relating to, or payments made on account of beneficial interests in a global preferred security or for maintaining, supervising or reviewing any of the records of DTC, any nominee or any participant relating to such beneficial interests.

A global preferred security is exchangeable for definitive certificated preferred stock or depositary receipts, as the case may be, registered in the name of, and a transfer of a global preferred security may be registered to, a person other than DTC or its nominee, only if:

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DTC notifies us that it is unwilling or unable to continue as depository for the global preferred security or at any time DTC ceases to be registered under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934; or

we determine in our discretion that the global preferred security shall be exchangeable for definitive preferred stock or depository receipts, as the case may be, in registered form.

Any global preferred security that is exchangeable pursuant to the preceding sentence will be exchangeable in whole for definitive certificated preferred stock or depository receipts, as the case may be, registered by the registrar in the name or names instructed by DTC. We expect that those instructions may be based upon directions received by DTC from its participants with respect to ownership of beneficial interests in that global preferred security.

Except as provided above, owners of the beneficial interests in a global preferred security will not be entitled to receive physical delivery of certificates representing shares of preferred stock or depository shares, as the case may be, and will not be considered the holders of preferred stock or depository shares, as the case may be. No global preferred security shall be exchangeable except for another global preferred security to be registered in the name of DTC or its nominee. Accordingly, each person owning a beneficial interest in a global preferred security must rely on the procedures of DTC and, if that person is not a participant, on the procedures of the participant through which that person owns its interest, to exercise any rights of a holder of preferred stock or depository shares, as the case may be.

We understand that, under existing industry practices, in the event that we request any action of holders, or an owner of a beneficial interest in a global preferred security desires to give or take any action that a holder of preferred stock or depository shares, as the case may be, is entitled to give or take, DTC would authorize the participants holding the relevant beneficial interests to give or take that action and those participants would authorize beneficial owners owning through those participants to give or take that action or would otherwise act upon the instructions of beneficial owners owning through them.

A brief description of DTC is set forth above under Description of Debt Securities Form of Debt Securities.

SELLING SECURITYHOLDER

In addition to covering the offering of securities by us, this prospectus covers the possible offering for resale from time to time of up to an aggregate of 6,580,392 shares of common stock by a selling securityholder, KeySpan Energy Development Corporation, an indirect wholly-owned subsidiary of KeySpan Corporation. KeySpan has publicly stated that it does not consider its investment in our company to be a core asset and it may therefore decide from time to time to sell all or part of its investment in our shares.

As of October 27, 2004, KeySpan beneficially owned 6,580,392 shares of common stock, or approximately 23% of our issued and outstanding common stock. Robert B. Catell, the Chairman of the Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer of KeySpan, and Stephen M. McKessy, a member of KeySpan's Board of Directors, serve on our Board of Directors. Mr. McKessy also serves on our Audit Committee.

If KeySpan elects to sell securities under this prospectus, a prospectus supplement will set forth, with respect to the selling securityholder:

the nature of any other position, office or other material relationship that the selling securityholder has had with us or any of our affiliates within the prior three years;

the amount of securities owned by the selling securityholder prior to the offering;

the amount of securities to be offered for the selling securityholder's account; and

the amount and (if one percent or more) the percentage of securities to be owned by the selling securityholder after completion of the offering.

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PLAN OF DISTRIBUTION

Primary Offerings

We may sell our securities through agents, underwriters or dealers or directly to purchasers.

We may designate agents to solicit offers to purchase our securities.

We will name any agent involved in offering or selling our securities and any commissions that we will pay to the agent in the prospectus supplement.

Unless we indicate otherwise in the prospectus supplement, our agents will act on a best efforts basis for the period of their appointment.

Our agents may be deemed to be underwriters under the Securities Act of 1933 of any of our securities that they offer or sell.

We may use an underwriter or underwriters in the offer or sale of our securities.

If we use an underwriter or underwriters, we will execute an underwriting agreement with the underwriter or underwriters at the time that we reach an agreement for the sale of our securities.

We will include the names of the specific managing underwriter or underwriters, as well as any other underwriters, and the terms of the transactions, including the compensation the underwriters and dealers will receive, in the prospectus supplement.

The underwriters will use the prospectus supplement to sell our securities.

We may use a dealer to sell our securities.

If we use a dealer, we, as principal, will sell our securities to the dealer.

The dealer will then sell our securities to the public at varying prices that the dealer will determine at the time it sells our securities.

We will include the name of the dealer and the terms of our transactions with the dealer in the prospectus supplement.

We may directly solicit offers to purchase our securities, and we may directly sell our securities to institutional or other investors. We will describe the terms of our direct sales in the prospectus supplement.

We may indemnify agents, underwriters, and dealers against certain liabilities, including liabilities under the Securities Act of 1933. Our agents, underwriters, and dealers, or their affiliates, may be customers of, engage in transactions with us or perform services for us in the ordinary course of business.

We may authorize our agents and underwriters to solicit offers by certain institutions to purchase our securities at the public offering price under delayed delivery contracts.

If we use delayed delivery contracts, we will disclose that we are using them in the prospectus supplement and will tell you when we will demand payment and delivery of the securities under the delayed delivery contracts.

These delayed delivery contracts will be subject only to the conditions that we set forth in the prospectus supplement.

We will indicate in the prospectus supplement the commission that underwriters and agents soliciting purchases of our securities under delayed delivery contracts will be entitled to receive.

As of the date of this prospectus, we have engaged no underwriter, broker, dealer or agent in connection with any distribution of securities pursuant to this prospectus.

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Secondary Offerings

The selling securityholder may sell securities covered by this prospectus from time to time in one or more transactions for so long as we keep the registration statement of which this prospectus forms a part effective. The selling securityholder may offer its securities directly to purchasers or through underwriters, brokers, dealers or agents, who may receive compensation in the form of underwriting discounts, commissions or concessions from the selling securityholder and/or the purchasers of the securities for whom they act as agent. The selling securityholder may sell securities at market prices prevailing at the time of sale, at prices related to the prevailing market prices, at negotiated prices or at fixed prices. These sales may be effected in one or more transactions, including:

on the New York Stock Exchange or any national securities exchange or quotation service on which the securities may be listed or quoted at the time of the sale;

in the over-the-counter market;

in hedging or derivative transactions;

in a private transaction and transactions other than on the New York Stock Exchange or other exchange or services or in the over-the-counter market;

through the writing of options, whether those options are listed on an options exchange or otherwise; or

through the settlement of short sales.

The selling securityholder might not elect to sell any securities under this prospectus. In addition, any securities covered by this prospectus that qualify for sale pursuant to Rule 144 of the Securities Act of 1933 may be sold under Rule 144 rather than pursuant to this prospectus. The selling securityholder will act independently of us in making decisions with respect to the timing, manner and size of any sales by it of securities covered by this prospectus.

As of the date of this prospectus, we have engaged no underwriter, broker, dealer or agent in connection with any distribution of securities pursuant to this prospectus by the selling securityholder. To the extent required, the amount of securities to be sold, the purchase price, the name of any applicable agent, broker, dealer or underwriter and any applicable commissions with respect to a particular offer will be set forth in the applicable prospectus supplement. The aggregate net proceeds to the selling securityholder from the sale of its securities offered hereby will be the sale price of those shares, less commissions, if any, and any other expenses of issuance and distribution not borne by us.

The selling securityholder and any brokers, dealers, agents or underwriters that participate with the selling securityholder in a distribution of securities may be deemed to be underwriters within the meaning of the Securities Act of 1933, in which case any discounts, concessions and commissions received by such brokers, dealers, agents or underwriters and any profit on the resale of the shares purchased by them may be deemed to be underwriting discounts and commissions under the Securities Act of 1933.

The applicable prospectus supplement will set forth the extent to which we will have agreed to bear fees and expenses of the selling securityholder in connection with the registration of the securities being offered by it. We may, if so indicated in the applicable prospectus supplement, agree to indemnify the selling securityholder against certain civil liabilities, including liabilities under the Securities Act of 1933.

LEGAL MATTERS

The legality of the securities has been passed upon for us and the selling securityholder by Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, Houston, Texas. If the securities are being distributed in an underwritten offering, certain legal matters will be passed upon for the underwriters by counsel identified in the related prospectus supplement.

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EXPERTS

The consolidated financial statements incorporated in this prospectus by reference from the Company's Annual Report on Form 10-K for the year ended December 31, 2003 have been audited by Deloitte & Touche LLP, an independent registered public accounting firm, as stated in their report (which report expresses an unqualified opinion and includes an explanatory paragraph relating to the adoption of Statement of Financial Accounting Standards (SFAS) No. 143, Accounting for Asset Retirement Obligations, and SFAS No. 148, Accounting for Stock-Based Compensation Transition and Disclosure, on January 1, 2003), which is incorporated herein by reference, and have been so incorporated in reliance upon the report of such firm given upon their authority as experts in accounting and auditing.

Table of Contents**PART II****INFORMATION NOT REQUIRED IN PROSPECTUS****ITEM 14. OTHER EXPENSES OF ISSUANCE AND DISTRIBUTION.**

The expenses in connection with the issuance and distribution of the securities being registered hereby, other than underwriting discounts and commissions, are as follows:

Securities and Exchange Commission filing fee	\$ 60,481
Legal fees and expenses	100,000*
Accountants fees and expenses	100,000*
Trustees fees and expenses	20,000*
Printing and engraving expenses	200,000*
Rating Agency fees	40,000*
State qualification expenses (including legal fees)	8,000*
Miscellaneous	25,000*
	<hr/>
Total	\$553,481*
	<hr/>

*Estimated.

ITEM 15. INDEMNIFICATION OF DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS.

Subsection (a) of Section 145 of the General Corporation Law of the State of Delaware empowers a corporation to indemnify any person who was or is a party or is threatened to be made a party to any threatened, pending or completed action, suit or proceeding, whether civil, criminal, administrative or investigative (other than an action by or in the right of the corporation) by reason of the fact that he is or was a director, officer, employee or agent of the corporation, or is or was serving at the request of the corporation as a director, officer, employee or agent of another corporation, partnership, joint venture, trust or other enterprise, against expenses (including attorneys fees), judgments, fines and amounts paid in settlement actually and reasonably incurred by him in connection with such action, suit or proceeding if he acted in good faith and in a manner he reasonably believed to be in or not opposed to the best interests of the corporation, and, with respect to any criminal action or proceeding, had no reasonable cause to believe his conduct was unlawful.

Subsection (b) of Section 145 empowers a corporation to indemnify any person who was or is a party or is threatened to be made a party to any threatened, pending or completed action or suit by or in the right of the corporation to procure a judgment in its favor by reason of the fact that such person acted in any of the capacities set forth above, against expenses (including attorneys fees) actually and reasonably incurred by him in connection with the defense or settlement of such action or suit if he acted in good faith and in a manner he reasonably believed to be in or not opposed to the best interests of the corporation, except that no indemnification may be made in respect of any claim, issue or matter as to which such person shall have been adjudged to be liable to the corporation unless and only to the extent that the Court of Chancery or the court in which such action or suit was brought shall determine upon application that, despite the adjudication of liability but in view of all the circumstances of the case, such person is fairly and reasonably entitled to indemnity for such expenses which the Court of Chancery or such other court shall deem proper.

Section 145 further provides that to the extent a director or officer of a corporation has been successful on the merits or otherwise in the defense of any action, suit or proceeding referred to in subsections (a) and (b) of Section 145 or in the defense of any claim, issue or matter therein, he shall be indemnified against expenses (including attorneys' fees) actually and reasonably incurred by him in connection therewith; that indemnification provided for by Section 145 shall not be deemed exclusive of any other rights to which the indemnified party may be entitled; that indemnification provided by Section 145 shall, unless otherwise provided when authorized or ratified, continue as to a person who has ceased to be a director, officer, employee or agent and shall inure to the benefit of such person's heirs, executors and administrators; and empowers the corporation to purchase and maintain insurance on

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behalf of a director or officer of the corporation against any liability asserted against him and incurred by him in any such capacity, or arising out of his status as such, whether or not the corporation would have the power to indemnify him against such liabilities under Section 145.

Section 102(b)(7) of the General Corporation Law of the State of Delaware provides that a certificate of incorporation may contain a provision eliminating or limiting the personal liability of a director to the corporation or its stockholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, provided that such provision shall not eliminate or limit the liability of a director (i) for any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the corporation or its stockholders, (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law, (iii) under Section 174 of the Delaware General Corporation Law or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit.

Section 5.07 of Houston Exploration's Restated Certificate of Incorporation, as amended, states that:

(a) No person who is or was a director of the Corporation shall be personally liable to the Corporation or its stockholders for monetary damages for breach of fiduciary duty as a director, except for liability (i) for any breach of the director's duty of loyalty to the Corporation or its stockholders, (ii) for acts or omissions not in good faith or which involve intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of law, (iii) under Section 174 of the DGCL or (iv) for any transaction from which the director derived an improper personal benefit.

(b) If the DGCL is hereafter amended to authorize corporate action further limiting or eliminating the personal liability of directors, then the personal liability of the directors to the Corporation or its stockholders shall be limited or eliminated to the full extent permitted by the DGCL, as so amended from time to time.

Article VIII of Houston Exploration's Restated Certificate of Incorporation and Article VIII of Houston Exploration's Restated Bylaws further provide that we shall indemnify our officers, directors, employees and agents to the fullest extent permitted by law. The officers and directors of our company are covered under our insurance policy.

ITEM 16. EXHIBITS.

Exhibit	Description
*1.1	Form of Common Stock Underwriting Agreement
*1.2	Form of Preferred Stock Underwriting Agreement
*1.3	Form of Debt Securities Underwriting Agreement
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- 4.1 Form of Senior Debt Indenture (including form of Senior Debt Security)
- 4.2 Form of Subordinated Debt Indenture (including form of Subordinated Debt Security)
- *4.3 Form of Deposit Agreement with respect to the Depositary Shares (including the terms of Depositary Receipts to be issued thereunder)
- *4.4 Form of Securities Purchase Contract
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Exhibit	Description
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23.3	Consent of Netherland, Sewell & Associates, Inc.
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* To be filed as an exhibit to a Current Report on Form 8-K of the registrant in connection with a specific offering.

** To be filed pursuant to Section 305(b)(2) of the Trust Indenture Act.

ITEM 17. UNDERTAKINGS.

Houston Exploration hereby undertakes:

(1) To file, during any period in which offers or sales are being made, a post-effective amendment to this registration statement: (i) to include any prospectus required by Section 10(a)(3) of the Securities Act of 1933; (ii) to reflect in the prospectus any facts or events arising after the effective date of the registration statement (or the most recent post-effective amendment thereof) which, individually or in the aggregate, represent a fundamental change in the information set forth in the registration statement; notwithstanding the foregoing, any increase or decrease in volume of securities offered (if the total dollar value of securities offered would not exceed that which was registered) and any deviation from the low or high end of the estimated maximum offering range may be reflected in the form of prospectus filed with the Commission pursuant to Rule 424(b) if, in the aggregate, the changes in volume and price represent no more than a 20 percent change in the maximum aggregate offering price set forth in the Calculation of Registration Fee table in the effective registration statement; and (iii) to include any material information with respect to the plan of distribution not previously disclosed in the registration statement or any material change to such information in the registration statement; provided, however, that clauses (i) and (ii) do not apply if the information required to be included in a post-effective amendment by those clauses is contained in periodic reports filed by Houston Exploration pursuant to Section 13 or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 that are incorporated by reference in the registration statement.

(2) That, for purposes of determining any liability under the Securities Act of 1933, each post-effective amendment that contains a form of prospectus shall be deemed to be a new registration statement relating to the securities offered therein, and the offering of such securities at that time shall be deemed to be the initial bona fide offering thereof.

(3) To remove from registration by means of a post-effective amendment any of the securities being registered which remain unsold at the termination of the offering.

(4) That, for purposes of determining any liability under the Securities Act of 1933, the information omitted from the form of prospectus filed as part of this registration statement in reliance upon Rule 430A and contained in a

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form of prospectus filed by the registrant pursuant to Rule 424(b)(1) or (4) or 497(h) under the Securities Act shall be deemed to be part of this registration statement as of the time it was declared effective.

(5) That, for purposes of determining any liability under the Securities Act of 1933, each filing of Houston Exploration's annual report pursuant to Section 13(a) or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 that is incorporated by reference in the registration statement shall be deemed to be a new registration statement relating to the securities offered therein, and the offering of such securities at that time shall be deemed to be the initial bona fide offering thereof.

(6) To file an application for the purpose of determining the eligibility of the trustee to act under subsection (a) of Section 310 of the Trust Indenture Act of 1939 in accordance with the rules and regulations prescribed by the Commission under Section 305(b)(2) of the Trust Indenture Act of 1939.

Insofar as indemnification for liabilities arising under the Securities Act of 1933 may be permitted to directors, officers and controlling persons of Houston Exploration pursuant to the foregoing provisions, or otherwise, Houston Exploration has been advised that in the opinion of the Securities and Exchange Commission such indemnification is against public policy as expressed in the Securities Act of 1933 and is, therefore, unenforceable. In the event that a claim for indemnification against such liabilities (other than the payment by Houston Exploration of expenses incurred or paid by a director, officer or controlling person of Houston Exploration in the successful defense of any action, suit or proceeding) is asserted by such director, officer or controlling person in connection with the securities being registered, Houston Exploration will, unless in the opinion of its counsel the matter has been settled by controlling precedent, submit to a court of appropriate jurisdiction the question whether such indemnification by it is against public policy, as expressed in the Securities Act of 1933, and will be governed by the final adjudication of such issue.

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SIGNATURES

Pursuant to the requirements of the Securities Act of 1933, the registrant certifies that it has reasonable grounds to believe that it meets all of the requirements for filing on Form S-3 and has duly caused this Registration Statement to be signed on its behalf by the undersigned, thereunto duly authorized, in the City of Houston, State of Texas, on October 27, 2004.

**THE HOUSTON EXPLORATION
COMPANY**

By: /s/ William G. Hargett
William G. Hargett
President, Chief Executive Officer and
Chairman of the Board of Directors

POWER OF ATTORNEY

Each person whose signature appears below hereby constitutes and appoints John H. Karnes and James F. Westmoreland, and each of them, his true and lawful attorney-in-fact and agent, with full powers of substitution, for him and in his name, place and stead, in any and all capacities, to sign and to file any and all amendments, including post-effective amendments, to this registration statement with the Securities and Exchange Commission granting to said attorney-in-fact power and authority to perform any other act on behalf of the undersigned required to be done in connection therewith.

Pursuant to the requirements of the Securities Act of 1933, this registration statement has been signed below by the following persons in the capacities indicated on October 27, 2004.

Signature	Title
<u>/s/ William G. Hargett</u> William G. Hargett	President, Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of Directors (Principal Executive Officer)
<u>/s/ John H. Karnes</u> John H. Karnes	Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer (Principal Financial Officer)
<u>/s/ James F. Westmoreland</u> James F. Westmoreland	Vice President, Chief Accounting Officer, Comptroller and Secretary (Principal Accounting Officer)
<u>/s/ Robert B. Catell</u>	Director

Robert B. Catell

/s/ John U. Clarke Director

John U. Clarke

/s/ David G. Elkins Director

David G. Elkins

/s/ Harold R. Logan, Jr. Director

Harold R. Logan, Jr.

/s/ Stephen W.
McKessy Director

Stephen W. McKessy

/s/ Donald C. Vaughn Director

Donald C. Vaughn

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