

Gas company criticized for uncontrolled methane leak near Porter Ranch

Abby Sewell, Los Angeles Times, 11-25-15

Air quality officials have cited Southern California Gas Co. officials over a month-long gas leak that has been sickening residents in the San Fernando Valley community of Porter Ranch, and county supervisors sharply criticized the utility Tuesday over the issue.

Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who represents the affected area, called a potentially lengthy timeline to fix the problem "nonsensical and irresponsible."

The leak at the gas company's Aliso Canyon storage facility in the Santa Susana Mountains began Oct. 23 and is emitting methane at a rate of about 50,000 kilograms per hour, accounting for about one-quarter of all methane emissions in California.

The leak is also emitting mercaptans, additives that give the natural gas a sulfur-like smell and can cause symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, headaches and nosebleeds. Porter Ranch residents have been complaining of those symptoms since the leak began.

"People's lives are being impacted and their property is being impacted," Antonovich said. The supervisor called gas company officials on the carpet at the panel's weekly meeting Tuesday.

Angelo J. Bellomo, director of environmental health for the county's Department of Public Health, said officials there do not expect any "long-term or permanent health effects" from the emissions, but that the temporary symptoms will continue as long as the leak does.

Gas company officials have said it could take months to stop the leak. Crews have tried unsuccessfully to stop the flow of gas by pumping fluid into the well.

The company is now preparing to drill a so-called "relief well" to intercept the gas if needed, a process that could take one to three months, said Jimmie Cho, senior vice president of gas operations and system integrity.

"It is our priority to safely and expeditiously stop the leak," he said.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District issued a notice of violation to the gas company on Monday, citing the "public nuisance" created by the leak. Air quality officials said it's too early to say how much the company might be fined, but the maximum penalty for such violations is generally \$75,000 a day.

Gas company vice president of customer services Gillian Wright told the supervisors, "We're deeply sorry for how the leak has impacted the community."

The company has been directed by county health officials to pay for temporary relocation for residents in the affected area. So far 259 households have applied and 67 have been placed in temporary housing, Wright said.

Porter Ranch resident Matt Pakucko, president of local advocacy group Save Porter ranch, said he's skeptical of claims that there will be no long-term health effects on the community.

Residents' "lives have been turned upside down this last month, and it seems to be getting worse," he told the board. "People are sick, their kids are sick. They've been going through this for a month."

The gas company is also preparing to spray an odor-mitigating solution in the area of the leak, but air quality officials expressed skepticism about that approach.

Mohsen Nazemi, the AQMD's deputy executive officer, said it's unclear if the odor mitigation would work, and even if it does, the solution has its own odor that some people might be sensitive to.

"We don't believe that this is an effective way of addressing the problem," he said.