

Health officials order gas company to help residents impacted by leaking well

Gregory J. Wilcox, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 11-20-15

Acknowledging that noxious fumes from a gas well above Porter Ranch are causing a health threat, Los Angeles County health officials on Thursday ordered Southern California Gas Co. to offer free temporary relocation assistance to any impacted residents.

Attempts to plug the nearly month-old leak have failed, the gas company said Thursday, and the work could drag on for weeks or possibly months.

Residents have experienced nausea, dizziness and other issues, and one said the number of those sickened is more than 100.

The gas company has already implemented a relocation plan, spokesman Javier Mendoza said, but so far Porter Ranch residents are not embracing offers of paid temporary relocation.

“To date SoCalGas has received about five or six calls from the Porter Ranch area. We offered relocation, and at this time no one has accepted the offer,” Mendoza said in an email.

“The claims will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis,” he said, adding that the claim form is on the company’s website, along with updates on the well repair and air sample test results.

The health order came one day after the state Department of Conservation issued an emergency order telling the company to make sure information about the leak at the Aliso Canyon storage facility in the Santa Susana Mountains and attempts to repair it is released in a timely fashion.

Thursday’s abatement order from the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health’s Bureau of Health Protection said that natural gas itself “poses little direct health threat upon inhalation in an outdoor setting.”

The issues have come from the mercaptan that is mixed with the gas to give it the rotten egg smell.

“Mercaptans, however, do pose a health threat to the community,” the agency said in its order.

The pipe in a 8,750-foot-deep well in the storage facility began leaking on Oct. 23, and residents soon began complaining of becoming sick from the smell of rotten eggs.

Complaints about the smell are coming in on a daily basis, and more than 200 have been logged by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the health department said in its order.

WHY HEALTH DEPARTMENT ACTED

Thursday’s order was issued by the county’s health department because it was clear that the problem could not be fixed soon, said Dr. Cyrus Rangan, director of toxicity for the Division of Environmental Health.

“It’s become clear that the problem seems to be much more complex than originally thought, and it may take a substantial amount of time,” Rangan said. “We’re still getting a steady stream of complaints.”

Rangan said there are no long-term effects from the odors but that it's uncomfortable for those experiencing them day to day, or for those who may have other underlying health concerns.

"We thought the best course of action was to make sure the Gas Co. offers relocation," Rangan said. "We issued a directive to the gas company to make it very public that they would provide relocation. It's a situation where you have these persistent health issues."

He said because the complaints seem similar, the health department found that to be enough evidence to issue the directive.

The health issues regarding mercaptan include short-term neurological problems, nausea, dizziness, gastrointestinal discomfort and respiratory issues, the health department said.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael Antonovich, whose district includes the storage field, had asked the health department to investigate the situation.

"The actions being taken by the county direct the gas company to expedite the abatement of this public health threat," Antonovich said in a statement.

VARYING RESPONSES

There was a faint odor of rotten eggs Thursday at the Renaissance at Porter Ranch, a new gated community of \$1 million-plus homes at the top of Corbin Avenue bordering the Aliso Canyon gas field.

Residents on the same street offered varying experiences. Some said they rarely smelled gas, while others said they could detect it even in a 50-mile-per-hour wind gust. Some said their children had been sick, but they didn't know if that was because of the odor.

Jose Cornejo, 48, who a year ago bought his home 100 feet from the gas field directly across the street, said he was having a birthday party with his 5-year-old daughter a month ago when one of the guests smelled gas. He checked his stove, his grill, his gas meters but found nothing.

Since then, he has smelled gas from time to time, but not enough to move his wife and children into temporary quarters.

"I'm not moving. Quite honestly, with this thing lingering, I couldn't sell this house if I wanted to. My kids haven't said that they're sick. They've had the flu, but that could be because they are" in school, he said.

Of the leak, he said, "It's very concerning. First they say it's a planned release, then they say it's an easy fix. Now it's going on three weeks. There's a failure in the process and a failure in our government to take action. There should have been a stronger response."

Another neighbor who declined to be identified said the family had experienced intestinal illnesses but they didn't know if was connected with the leak.

As the sun was setting, two community volunteers with the gas company were sitting at a table near an entrance to the gas field. They said they were not informed about either the state directive or the health department abatement. They offered a six-page brochure about the gas leak with an apology from the gas company.

TIMING CRITICIZED

Matt Pakucko, a founder and president of Save Porter Ranch, applauded the health department's action but said it should have come sooner.

"That's great. It's about time. People up here have been sick for a month, but it's about 27 days too late," he said of health officials ordering the gas company to pick up the tab for relocation expenses.

He estimates that more than 100 people in his social media circle have become sick at one time or another as the well is being worked on.

"A friend of mine was out there the other night and didn't smell anything for an hour. When she came in she was sick, her chest was pounding and she couldn't breathe," Pakucko said.

Last Friday afternoon a mist of brine and drilling fluid was released into the air during an attempt to stop the leak, and the gas company cautioned residents to stay inside for several hours. The company said the mist cloud eventually evaporated, and it did not migrate from above the storage field into the residential area.

Pakucko's group has held several meetings and staged protests over the leaking well. Another demonstration is being planned for Monday night, he said.

ORDER TO RELEASE INFORMATION

Meanwhile, the gas company said Thursday that it will comply with the state's emergency order to distribute information about its progress in stopping the leak.

"SoCalGas ... will provide the requested information on time. State representatives have full access to the facility at all times and have been at the well site daily. SoCalGas is fully cooperative and has already been providing information on a daily basis to state and local agencies and safety officials," the company said in a statement.

Department of Conservation spokeswoman Teresa Schilling on Thursday said issuing the order was an organizational step.

"This is a multiregulatory agency effort and it's really important ... to make sure everybody is getting information in real time," she said. "There is a lot happening up there. There are a lot of boots on the ground, and the order is designed to make things as smooth as possible."

WORK ON THE WELL

On Thursday the company said that well control experts continued to try to stop the flow of gas with a fluid-based plug and set up a secondary pumping operation to allow work even in bad weather.

"The process to stop the leak is deliberate, methodical and must be guided by an overriding priority on safety," Mendoza said in an email. "As a prudent measure, SoCalGas will at the same time prepare to construct a relief well. This well would connect to the leaking well and create another entry point from which to pump fluid to stop the flow of gas."

SoCalGas has already applied for the drilling permit and started grading the area, he said.

If needed, construction could start next week, but it could take several months to complete, the company said.

WIND ISSUES

Paula Cracium, president of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council, was briefed on the situation by Bruce Husson from the conservation department's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources and sent an email summary to the members.

It said that the division estimates that the well is releasing between half a million to 1 million cubic feet of methane per day, and that using the brine solution to choke the well has failed.

Workers are now using a barite pill that will harden over time.

"They can do up to 10 applications one every other day. This tentatively can take up to three weeks. The wind is an issue with the process," according to the email.

"It's a big deal," Cracium said in an interview. "If it (the pill) goes well it could be another three weeks. If it goes badly we could be well into next year."