

Catastrophic Gas Leak Temporarily Stopped

A relief well has reached the Southern California Gas Co. well that has been leaking since October, forcing the evacuation of thousands.

Paige Austin, Los Angeles City News, 2-11-16

LOS ANGELES -- Signaling that relief is potentially in sight for thousands of residents in Porter Ranch, Southern California Gas Co. crews temporarily controlled the leak of natural gas today from the Aliso Canyon Storage Facility well that has been spewing gas since late October.

According to the utility, a relief well more than a mile long intercepted the leaking well, and crews began pumping heavy fluids to control the flow of gas. Work will now begin to seal the well and permanently cap the leak.

“We have temporarily controlled the natural gas flow from the leaking well and begun the process of sealing the well and permanently stopping the leak,” said Jimmie Cho, SoCalGas senior vice president of gas operations and system integrity.

Gas Co. officials said that while the development is a “positive” step, cement will still need to be injected from the relief well -- which is more than 8,600 feet -- into the leaking well, a process expected to take several days. Once the gas company seals the leaking well with cement, the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources will have to confirm that the flow of gas has stopped. That process is expected to take several more days.

Once the state confirms that the leak has been halted, residents who have been relocated from their homes due to the leak will have eight days to move back to their homes. People living in temporary housing with extended leases will have until those leases run out to return home.

As of Wednesday, 4,645 households were living in temporary housing, at Gas Co. expense. According to the utility, 1,726 other households that had been relocated have already returned home. The utility has also installed 5,467 air scrubbers at Porter Ranch-area homes and performed “weatherization” work on 5,410 homes.

“We are so relieved that the Gas Co. was able (to) successfully control the flow of this leak and we look forward to it being certified safe for residents to move home,” said Paula Cracium, president of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council. “The community is exhausted after living with these effects for over a hundred days and excited to be back in their homes.”

Students at two Los Angeles Unified School District campuses were also forced to move due to the leak and concerns about its impact on the health of students and staff.

Roughly 1,100 kindergarten through 8th-grade students at Porter Ranch Community School have been attending class at Northridge Middle School since the beginning of the year. The 770 kindergarten through 5th-grade students at Castlebay Lane Charter School have been at Sunny Brae Elementary School in Winnetka.

LAUSD officials said absentee rates had been unusually high at both campuses since the leak began in late October. Despite the leak being temporarily stopped and potentially on the way to being permanently sealed,

the relocated students are expected to continue classes at their temporary campuses until the end of the school year.

The leak was discovered Oct. 23 and has had long-lasting repercussions, including multiple lawsuits and criminal charges filed by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.

The Gas Co. was charged with three counts of failing to report the release of hazardous materials from Oct. 23 to Oct. 26, and one count of discharging air contaminants, beginning Oct. 23 and continuing through today. The charges are all misdemeanors.

If convicted, the company could be fined up to \$25,000 a day for each day it failed to notify the state Office of Emergency Services about the leak. It could be fined up to \$1,000 per day for air pollution violations, prosecutors said.

Officials with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health have said they do not believe the gas leak poses any risk of long-term health issues, but the agency plans to continue monitoring air quality in the area even though the flow of gas has been temporarily stopped.

Los Angeles City Councilman Mitchell Englander hailed the news that the leak had been at least temporarily plugged.

"With so many lives affected over the past our months, the news of finally stopping the leak will allow this community to begin breathing a health sigh of relief," he said. "The next several phases are critical to ensuring the capped well is certified, the entire facility is safe and this community can begin to recover."

Some residents have been pushing for the Gas Co. to shut down the entire Aliso Canyon Storage Facility, which has dozens of wells -- many of which date back to the 1950s, including the one that has been leaking. As a result of the leak, legislation has been introduced in Sacramento calling for stricter requirements for inspecting wells across the state in hopes of avoiding a similar leak.

"Stopping this leak is critical to ensure the safety of the Porter Ranch community, but this isn't the end of the story," said Damon Nagami, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Southern California Ecosystems Project. "We must do everything we can to protect families in California and across the country -- as well as our climate -- from harmful gas leaks. That means reforming California's broken system for regulating injection wells like this one, and setting new limits on methane and other pollutants from oil and gas facilities currently in operation nationwide."