

# How the Porter Ranch gas leak may lead to power shortages in Southern California

**Brenda Gazzar and Mike Reicher, Los Angeles Daily News, 2-2-16**

Top energy officials are concerned that Southern California may not have enough power come this summer.

California's primary energy policy agency and state utility regulators told Gov. Jerry Brown this week that they're concerned about future energy reliability in light of a moratorium on injections at Southern California Gas Co.'s Aliso Canyon natural gas storage facility.

"The immediate issue has been gas system reliability for core customers, which we are working to ensure reliable gas for the rest of winter" given the amount of working gas left at the storage facility, stated the Monday letter to Brown from the California Energy Commission, California Public Utilities Commission and California Independent System Operator. The latter entity is a nonprofit that manages the flow of electricity across high-voltage, long-distance power lines that make up the bulk of California's power grid.

"Our shared concern is electric system reliability for this summer, and both gas and electric system reliability for next winter and beyond in the event injections cannot resume," according to the letter.

SoCalGas voluntarily stopped injecting natural gas wells at the 3,600-acre facility near Porter Ranch within a week after a massive leak was detected on Oct. 23 at an underground well. The state's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources, which is investigating the leak and overseeing efforts to plug it, formalized that with an emergency order to halt injections there on Dec. 10. Brown reiterated it with his emergency declaration on Jan. 6.

"There is good reason to be concerned that reliability of supply may be critical for electric generators in the L.A. Basin, especially those serving (the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power)," the letter from CEC Chairman Robert Weisenmiller, CPUC President Michael Picker and CAISO President Stephen Berberich stated.

There are 18 electric generation plants in the L.A. Basin area that receive gas from the Aliso Canyon facility, SoCalGas spokeswoman Kristine Lloyd said.

It's a facility that observers say has become vital in the mix of fuels that provide power across the region.

"We don't actually have any substitute for natural gas at this point," said Stephanie Pincetl, director of the California Center for Sustainable Communities at UCLA.

It's a key component in today's energy supply, Pincetl said, because solar and other renewable sources aren't yet abundant enough.

Natural gas is “an important bridge fuel” as the DWP reduces investment in coal and expands its energy portfolio to include more renewable resources, said Michael Webster, the power system executive director of engineering and technical services.

At the DWP, the nation’s largest municipal electric utility, natural gas accounts for 22 percent of power generation, according to Webster.

“If there’s not enough natural gas, the end result could be that we couldn’t meet the full demand of our customers,” he said.

SoCalGas officials “said it’s an increased risk and we’re taking that seriously,” Webster added.

A team of experts from the gas company and the DWP is studying the connection between the gas and power systems in the Los Angeles Basin, given the constraints on gas deliveries and electric transmission as well as changes in energy demand.

The reliability risks will be laid out and an action plan presented at a joint agency workshop in Los Angeles in April, according to the letter.

SoCalGas executives contend the Aliso Canyon storage facility is critical to the reliable delivery of low cost, clean energy to homes and businesses throughout Southern California each day.

“Without the ability to operate the Aliso Canyon storage field, Californians could be at substantial risk of gas shortages during times of system stress,” said Lloyd, the spokeswoman. “We will continue to work with all applicable agencies involved to ensure that Aliso Canyon continues to provide the reliable natural gas and electricity that powers Southern California.”

Last month, the CPUC ordered the gas company to take steps to stop withdrawing gas from the field when the level of working gas reaches 15 billion cubic feet. The goal was to reduce the pressure within the facility as much as possible in order to minimize the rate of the gas leak while ensuring “energy reliability requirements so that customers are not left without heat and hot water and electricity outages do not occur,” according to a Jan. 21 CPUC letter to the gas company. State regulators also ordered SoCalGas to work with state and local agencies to develop “all possible alternatives to reliance” on the Aliso Canyon facility for natural gas service.

Some 86,000 metric tons of methane is estimated to have escaped into the air as a result of the leaking well, according to a spokesman from the California Air Resources Board.

In response to Monday’s letter, the governor’s office on Thursday said that “California’s energy regulators are working hard to ensure that Los Angeles maintains sufficient gas supply in the face of the Aliso Canyon emergency. Conservation and grid management will remain key parts of continued reliable gas supplies.”