

What Happens in Porter Ranch Now That the Enormous Gas Leak is Finally Plugged?

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It took three and a half months, but the Southern California Gas Company finally has control of the leaking well at its Aliso Canyon natural gas storage field. The gas leak that has terrorized neighboring Porter Ranch has been temporarily plugged, and officials say the leaking well could be permanently sealed with concrete as early as today, according to the *LA Times*. This is certainly welcome news to the gas company, as well as to the beleaguered and displaced residents of Porter Ranch, but while the well may no longer be leaking, the aftermath of this ordeal will be long and far-reaching. Questions have surfaced about the safety of the massive gas storage facility moving forward, and whether the Porter Ranch neighborhood can get back on its feet. The magnitude of the Porter Ranch disaster has LA City Councilmember Mitchell Englander referring to it as a "game-changer."

Plugging the well permanently

It's been a long time coming, but the gas company entered the final stages of plugging the well this week. Workers have dug nearly 8,500 feet into the ground to pierce the walls of the leaking gas well just above its connection to the gas reservoir below. They now pump mud into the well to plug the leak, and monitor it for gas bubbles. If no gas bubbles appear in the mud for 24 hours, workers will have the all clear to pump concrete underground and seal up the damaged well for good. Gas well SS25 will then be permanently out of commission. From there, it's up to state regulators to declare the Porter Ranch gas leak officially over. All deadlines for resident relocation will begin as of that announcement.

Resident PTSD

It's been a rough few months for the residents of Porter Ranch. They suffered through the health effects of breathing natural gas fumes, relocated from their homes when the nosebleeds and headaches became unbearable, and watched helplessly from (often hyper-expensive) temporary housing as their property values fell. Now, as they move back into the homes they abandoned months ago, they may never feel quite comfortable with the safety of their air. Paula Cracium, president of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council, says they'll feel "a version of PTSD" should they ever smell a gas odor. Other Porter Ranch residents raised concerns at a neighborhood council meeting that chemicals from the gas leak have been absorbed by their furniture and carpets. They know the leak has stopped, but they are still not sure they're safe.

Who exactly is in charge?

With information trickling in from so many sources, residents don't know who they can trust for accurate information about the gas leak and its effects. Despite assurances that the leak will soon be plugged, there are conflicting views as to how long it will be before the air in Porter Ranch can be deemed definitively safe. SoCal Gas was initially giving relocated residents just 48 hours to move back into their homes, before the City Attorney's office made them extend that window to eight days. Meanwhile, the LA County Board of Supervisors said that the eight-day window the City Attorney's office fought for still wasn't enough time to accurately assess air quality; they called for a 30-day period for residents to return home so the Department of Public Health could monitor air quality for at least a month. Not even government agencies are consistent and authoritative in assisting the Porter Ranch refugees.

Lawsuits

Between the price of relocating almost 5,000 Porter Ranch households, digging a relief well, and all the natural gas it lost into the atmosphere, the Aliso Canyon gas leak has already cost SoCal Gas somewhere in the neighborhood of \$300 million. Unfortunately for the gas company, they'll be spending a lot more money on the gas leak in years to come. According to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, some 67 lawsuits are pending against SoCal Gas.

Despite all these staggering costs for the gas company, it should not result in any rate increase for SoCal Gas customers. The California Energy Commission is overseeing the gas company's costs so they are not passed on to consumers.

The future of gas wells in Aliso Canyon

The gas leak that caused all the havoc for Porter Ranch is just one of 115 wells that SoCal Gas operates in its Aliso Canyon storage facility. The storage field has a capacity of 86 billion cubic feet of gas, making it one of the largest storage facilities in the country. The gas company itself has admitted that many of the 115 wells in Aliso Canyon are "corroded and mechanically damaged." If it plans to store 86 billion cubic feet of natural gas underground again, SoCal Gas will need to embark on some major inspections and upkeep.