

Fracking may be linked to Porter Ranch gas leak

Maya Golden-Krasner, Sacramento Bee, 1-22-15

Did fracking play a role in the Porter Ranch natural gas leak, one of the biggest environmental disasters in recent California history?

In October, a ruptured storage well in the Aliso Canyon oil field began spewing hundreds of thousands of tons of noxious gas into Los Angeles neighborhoods. Three months later, this massive leak still hasn't been stanchied. Thousands of people in the Porter Ranch area have been driven from their homes, schools and businesses by horrible smells and spiking levels of cancer-causing benzene.

State regulators don't seem to know what caused the leak, or how to stop it. But newly uncovered documents show that hydraulic fracturing was commonly used in the Aliso Canyon gas storage wells – including a well less than a half-mile from the leak.

Gov. Jerry Brown should immediately halt fracking in gas storage facilities throughout California. This technique – injecting fluids, including toxic chemicals, at enormous pressures into the wells – poses a huge threat to public safety.

The facts about this little-known practice were buried in a recent California Council on Science and Technology report. “Hydraulic fracturing facilitates about a third of the subsurface storage of natural gas in the state,” and is especially common in Aliso Canyon, the report says. Operators frack storage wells to increase gas production, which decreases by about 5 percent a year, according to a U.S. Department of Energy report.

In California, natural gas is often stored in depleted oil wells built more than 60 years ago. These aging wells were not designed to handle the extremely high pressure of fracking. Their metal casings are often corroded, making them susceptible to damage caused by acids and other chemicals injected at high pressures.

The public is not notified of this practice. That's because California's new fracking notification law, Senate Bill 4, contains a little-noticed provision exempting well stimulation for gas storage. And officials with the state's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources know disturbingly little about fracking in Aliso Canyon wells or other gas storage operations around the state.

That's consistent with the Brown administration's hands-off approach to regulating oil and gas companies' underground injection activities. In 2011, Brown fired two oil regulators who raised safety concerns. Last year, state regulators even admitted they had let oil companies drill thousands of injection wells into legally protected underground water supplies.

Still, a few hints about gas storage fracking can be found in well records. State documents show that in 2005 a storage well was fracked less than half a mile from the ruptured well. My organization's review of well records suggests this practice usually isn't noted by the companies operating the wells or state officials.

Despite the widespread use of this practice, most Californians have no idea that gas storage wells near their homes are being fracked. That's absolutely unacceptable and must end immediately.

We still don't know when the disastrous gas leak at Aliso Canyon will be stopped. But every possible measure should be taken to reduce the risk of another such catastrophe – and that must include permanently shutting the facility and prohibiting fracking statewide.