

Levels of Cancer-Causing Chemical in L.A. Gas Leak Underreported

Associated Press, The California Healthline, 1-15-16

On Thursday, the utility company in charge of a well that has been leaking natural gas since late last year said that it has found higher-than-normal levels of a cancer-causing chemical more times than previously reported, the *Washington Post* "Morning Mix" reports (Kaplan, "Morning Mix," *Washington Post*, 1/15).

Background

Last week, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) declared a state of emergency around a well near the Porter Ranch neighborhood in Los Angeles that has been leaking massive amounts of natural gas since October 2015 (*California Healthline*, 1/7).

According to the Environmental Defense Fund, the leak has released about 84,000 metric tons of methane into the air and forced more than 4,500 families to relocate ("Morning Mix," *Washington Post*, 1/15).

In his order, Brown said he will ensure the Southern California Gas Co. covers costs related to the leak and will convene a panel of scientific and medical experts to review potential public health concerns (*California Healthline*, 1/7).

The company is drilling a relief well to help stem the leak, and state leaders will provide more updates at a public meeting on Friday (California Office of Emergency Services release, 1/14).

Utility Company Finds High Levels of Benzene

According to "Morning Mix," the utility company during 1,200 tests over the last few months has found high levels of benzene -- which can cause anemia, leukemia and other cancers -- at least 14 times.

The company previously said it only had found higher-than-normal levels of the chemical twice.

Kristine Lloyd, a spokesperson for the company, said the discrepancy was "an oversight" that is being corrected.

Details of Health Effects

Meanwhile, some residents in the area near the leak have been reporting health issues, such as:

- Breathing problems;
- Dizziness;
- Headaches;

- Nosebleeds; and
- Vomiting.

Health officials have said the symptoms are reactions to a noxious additive in the gas used to alert individuals that methane is in the air ("Morning Mix," *Washington Post*, 1/15).

The utility company and public health officials agree that the leak likely does not pose any long-term health risks.

Still, some experts note that it is unclear whether benzene fumes lingered long enough to exceed the recommended exposure limits.

Seth Shonkoff -- executive director of PSE Healthy Energy, an independent energy science and policy institute, and a visiting scholar at UC-Berkeley -- said, "I have not seen anything convincing that it's been proven to be safe," adding, "I'm not going on record as saying this is absolutely an unsafe situation; I'm saying there are a number of red flags."

However, Cyrus Rangan, a medical toxicologist at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, said it is unlikely that safe exposure levels were exceeded (*AP/Oregonian*, 1/14).