

State: Methane leak from broken Porter Ranch gas well slows

Gregory J. Wilcox, Los Angeles Daily News, 1-12-16

The amount of methane leaking from the broken Southern California Gas Co. well above Porter Ranch has been steadily decreasing, a new state air sampling shows.

Levels are now 60 percent below a peak level in late November, according to a posting on the California Air Resources Board website.

Measurements taken on Friday show methane leaking at the rate of 23,400 kilograms per hour, which is well under the 58,000 kph rate measured on Nov. 28.

The rate of release has been steadily dropping since late November, the air board's sampling shows.

Still, the decrease comes after scores of residents in Porter Ranch have reported feeling sick, with many relocating to other areas.

The periodic measurements are carried out by Scientific Aviation using small planes equipped with monitors to measure methane.

The measurements provide an emission rate at the time the flights are conducted and "may vary considerably," the air board said in a statement.

"They do, however, provide a sense of what is happening with the leak and can be used to develop a very rough estimate of the total methane leaked to date. The ... series collected to date suggests the emission rate of the leak is decreasing as the reservoir is being depleted," the statement said.

Flight time over the site of leaking well SS 25 near the top of Oat Mountain has been limited because of the spate of El Niño-generated storms that have been pounding the state, said air board spokesman Dave Clegern.

These samplings provide only a preliminary estimate.

Continuous measurements are also being collected as part of the State's Greenhouse Gas Monitoring network. Final results based on these measurements will take time to process and will not be available until several months after the leak has been plugged.

"We're encouraged that emissions are dropping, but won't be able to determine the full impact of the leak until after it is sealed," Clegern said in an email.

SoCalGas said in a statement that the latest reading shows a 20 percent drop since the prior reading on Dec. 23 and that they show progress is being made.

Company officials also said that according to the air board's report on annual green house gas emissions in California, the estimated total from the Aliso leak is 0.4 percent of the state's total annual greenhouse gas emissions.

The leak in the company's big Aliso Canyon storage field was discovered on Oct. 23, and it has pumped at least 65,000 tons of methane into the atmosphere above Porter Ranch.

"SoCalGas reiterates its intent to mitigate the environmental impact of the actual amount of natural gas released from the leak," the company statement said.

Some critics of the operation makes one thing is clear.

"The new airplane measurements show the only solution thus far to actually cut pollution from Aliso Canyon has been to pump out as much gas as possible," said Timothy J. O'Connor, senior Attorney and director of the California Climate Initiative at the Environmental Defense Fund, said in an email. "Even at these reduced rates though ... Aliso Canyon is pumping out climate pollution with a short-term impact equal to driving 3.7 million cars."

The company also provided an update on the leak repair process and progress being made with a relief well drilling operation it hopes will kill SS 25.

"We've drilled to a depth of approximately 7,000 feet (and) we have to drill to a depth of over 8,000 feet, and remain on schedule to complete this process between late February and late March," company spokesman Raul Gordillo said in an email.

The field has a capacity to store 86 billion cubic feet of gas. It was at 93 percent capacity on Oct. 23. It is now at less than 50 percent capacity, the company has said.

To decrease the amount of the odorized natural gas emitted into the atmosphere and neighboring community, the company is developing a system designed to capture and control a portion of the leaking gas.

If approved, it will pipe the gas through a special filtering system or burn it off in a special chamber, the company said.

The company also is proceeding with its relocation system for families sickened by the leak.

As of Tuesday, 2,506 families have been placed in temporary housing, 1,550 relocations are pending and the company is waiting on a decision from 549 families, Gordillo said.