

Regulators May Reopen Aliso Canyon Gas Field Over Residents' Objections

Molly Peterson, KQED News, 2-10-17

About a year after plugging the largest methane leak in U.S. history, Southern California Gas Co. may once again start pumping natural gas into its Aliso Canyon storage field in Los Angeles County. State regulators are weighing whether to reopen the gas field over the objections of residents and politicians.

"I think the wells are safe," says Ken Harris, California's Oil and Gas supervisor, one of two regulators making the decision. He says SoCalGas has replaced miles of pipeline at the field. Inspectors have cleared 37 out of 114 gas wells for operation so far and are still checking out the rest. And Harris says new rules would require more and better inspections.

"It's the present condition of the well we have confidence in. It's how it's going to be operated, and the fact that these tests will be carried out in the future, so we'll be able to follow the health of the well, something that was not done in the past," Harris says. "I don't think any gas field has been through the level of scrutiny Aliso Canyon has been under."

Harris says the public has to trust the technical expertise of his agency, the Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).

But hundreds of people packed public meetings in Woodland Hills last week to oppose the reopening of Aliso Canyon and say they absolutely do not trust the regulators.

The initial leak temporarily forced thousands of families in the hillside community of Porter Ranch from their homes.

Over the last year some disputes with SoCalGas — like relocation costs and home cleaning — have been settled. As of the end of 2016, SoCalGas has spent \$764 million on its response to the leak, a figure that includes both site safety and upgrades and community response.

Health Study Hasn't Begun

But other major questions remain unresolved. Dissatisfied Porter Ranch residents still wonder exactly what's to blame for the headaches, nosebleeds, nausea and other health symptoms reported by some residents, first during the leak and intermittently since then.

'We don't need you to sell us on the need or the safety of this facility. What we need is to stop being sick.' *Helen Ritenour, former Porter Ranch resident*

Those complaints flared up again during a period when the company announced it was withdrawing small amounts of gas from Aliso Canyon to cover demand on cold days in January. Twenty-nine odor complaints were filed with the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD), but SoCalGas points out that fence-line data from eight pairs of monitors showed normal background levels of airborne pollutants during that time.

No health study is yet underway, in part because of disputes between public officials and SoCalGas about any study's scope and cost. But that's changing. On Wednesday, the AQMD settled a civil lawsuit against SoCalGas for \$8.5 million, which includes \$1 million for a health investigation.

According to a release from the AQMD, that will include “an enhanced assessment of residents’ exposure to air pollution from the leak; a community health survey; and an analysis of potential associations between reported health effects and exposure to air pollutants.”

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health — a potential partner in the AQMD’s effort — seeks a multiyear, multimillion-dollar study, says Angelo Bellomo, the county’s director of environmental health.

“Whether this facility stays closed forever, or whether it resumes operation, having the kind of study we’re talking about is the only way this community will have closure to their health concerns and needs,” he says.

Bellomo notes that it will take \$12-13 million to fund a multiyear, “meaningful study” for the residents of Porter Ranch.

Is a ‘Root-Cause Analysis’ Necessary?

Residents say they’re also waiting for someone to investigate the root cause of the natural gas blowout. On the first night of two public meetings, members of the activist group Save Porter Ranch seized control of the public meeting.

Calen McGee, the facilitator hired by the state to run the meeting, said, “You’re stopping this meeting,” and “Stop that,” as members of the audience chanted, “We are the public! We are the public!” and A leader of Save Porter Ranch, Matt Pakucko, vented his frustration through a bullhorn once his microphone was cut off.

“If you cannot absolutely state, with the root-cause analysis completed, what caused the blowout, then you cannot claim that this facility is safe,” Pakucko shouted.

State Sen. Henry Stern has introduced a bill to require that analysis to be completed before the gas field reopens. Some Republican lawmakers and U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein have signed on, too.

“The hope is we don’t have to push the bill all the way through and that they’ll take a pause here and reassess, not rush this thing but we’ll go that route if we have to.”

SoCalGas says Stern’s legislation and a root-cause analysis are “unnecessary” because a federal report has identified an equipment problem for the well that failed, SS-25.

That report found a leak in the outer casing of the well, and SoCalGas points out that DOGGR’s well testing covers the outer casing of every well approved to return to service.

Longer-Term Questions

Independent experts, including a Louisiana-based engineering firm consulting for Los Angeles County, are raising technical questions to which DOGGR and CPUC must respond before making the decision to reopen the Aliso Canyon field.

The company says that this storage field is critical to meeting peak demand on the coldest and hottest days, another question disputed by consultants for the county and Food and Water Watch, an advocacy group seeking to shut the gas field down permanently.

Required by law, the state will soon begin to look into whether it can provide enough power without Aliso Canyon's gas reserves.

CPUC executive director Tim Sullivan says that question is separate from the decision to reopen, the process underway now.

"The first decision we have to make is, based on the facts and the investments and the repairs that have been done, is the facility safe enough to open? The second question is, does it make sense to have this facility here in the long run?" Sullivan says. "And decisions in the short term aren't necessarily influencing decisions in the long term."

Liza Tucker, with the advocacy group Consumer Watchdog, says the fact that so many questions remain unanswered is itself evidence that reopening Aliso Canyon is a bad idea.

"The idea that we have communities living practically on top of those gas wells and that we had a terrible accident that displaced thousands of people and sickened hundreds of people tells you something," Tucker says. "It's not worth the risk of reopening the facility."

Helen Ritenour, a former Porter Ranch resident who testified at the recent public meeting, says regulators should take action to protect her community.

Fifteen months ago, when a well first blew at Aliso Canyon, Ritenour and her husband had just bought their first home in Porter Ranch, and had a baby. She told DOGGR chief Harris and CPUC executive director Sullivan that her health risks remain unknown.

"We don't need you to sell us on the need or the safety of this facility. What we need is to stop being sick," she says.

Ritenour says she and her neighbors just want to feel safe again.

"Let them speak! Let them speak!"