

California's freeze on Porter Ranch gas field use shatters in the cold

Sharon McNary, Southern California Public Radio, 1-24-17

A spike in natural gas usage across an unusually frigid Los Angeles on Tuesday morning prompted Southern California Gas Company to withdraw gas from its troubled Aliso Canyon underground gas storage field for the first time in a year.

Ever since a well ruptured in October 2015, causing the nation's largest-ever uncontrolled natural gas release, the field has been subject to a state-ordered moratorium barring the company from adding or removing gas from the field. Tuesday's withdrawal of gas comes just one week before the state holds a series of public meetings on whether the field should be allowed back online.

The L.A. Basin was already under a SoCal Gas advisory issued Monday to conserve natural gas supplies during the rainy weather and a cold snap. The advisory asked residential users to set their thermostats a few degrees lower — about 68 degrees — and to delay using washing machines, dryers and other major gas appliances for a day or so.

By Tuesday morning at 7 a.m., it was clear to the company's top gas distribution executive that it was time to tap the Aliso gas field.

"We had all our other storage fields being utilized to their fullest extent. In order to maintain system reliability, we needed to use Aliso Canyon during this morning period," said Rodger Schwecke, vice president for gas transmission and storage for SoCal Gas and San Diego Gas & Electric.

When outdoor temperatures dropped into the 30s and low 40s early Tuesday, home gas usage increased as heaters turned on and consumed more gas than usual to raise indoor temperatures to pre-set thermostat levels.

"When people get up in the morning, they turn on the heater, they take a shower, they cook their meals, that creates a peak," Schwecke said. "We had an hourly peak demand that was higher during that period of time."

The company withdrew gas from the Aliso Canyon field from 7 a.m. until about 11:30 a.m., he said. He said he would not know the amount that was withdrawn until Wednesday. The field is under a moratorium for both injections and withdrawals of gas, pending completion of state safety inspections of aging wells — however, withdrawals are permitted if necessary to prevent a shortage.

Schwecke said the company would not be allowed to replace the gas it withdrew until the state completes its review of the Aliso Canyon field.

The issue with gas supplies is not the amount that is used over a cold day, Schwecke said — it's the inability of the company to put enough gas in the pipelines quickly enough to meet the spikes in demand that come in the early morning when people awake, and in the evening when they come home.

Some Porter Ranch residents and environmental activists who oppose resuming gas injections at the Aliso Canyon gas field said Tuesday's announcement of gas being withdrawn was a "manufactured shortage" designed to pressure officials into lifting the moratorium on the field being returned to normal operations.

"We are asking California Attorney General Javier Becerra and L.A. City Attorney Mike Feuer to immediately open an investigation into unfair business practices by SoCalGas and its parent company Sempra," said Food and Water Watch organizer Alexandra Nagy.

The group says that measures imposed on SoCal Gas and its largest customers to conserve supplies and more carefully match the amount of gas requested to the amount used has resulted in no gas shortages while the Aliso Canyon gas field has been under a moratorium.

Schwecke said the company was already pulling the maximum amount of gas it could from its second-largest gas field, the Honor Rancho field along I-5 in Santa Clarita. He said that field isn't an adequate substitute for Aliso Canyon for various mechanical reasons, including its distance from Los Angeles-area customers and the differing pressure of its feedline from gas fields in the San Joaquin Valley.

SoCal Gas has two other fields. The Playa del Rey gas field is fairly small, and some of its wells are being renovated to meet new safety requirements. The other field at Goleta is also small — and far from customers.