Gas line explosion in California kills four, injures dozens

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Four people were killed, 52 injured, and dozens of homes were destroyed when a gas line exploded in the San Francisco suburb of San Bruno Thursday evening.

The sudden blast occurred around 6:24 pm, leaving a crater measuring 30 feet in diameter and 15 feet deep, according to one estimate. The explosion created a fire zone of approximately 15 to 20 acres, engulfing much of the neighborhood in flames throughout the evening and the following morning. By Friday afternoon reports indicated the blaze was 75 percent contained.

Reports indicate 35 to 50 houses were completely destroyed, and several more were severely damaged. With some of the injured in critical condition, the death toll from the blast could rise. By Friday afternoon, city officials were still unable to account for all residents in the area. More than 100 had been evacuated to shelters.

At least four firefighters sustained injuries in the struggle to contain the fire.

San Bruno lies very close to the San Francisco International Airport, about 12 miles south of downtown San Francisco, extending from the lowlands of the bay into the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains. The foothills open up to the offshore winds of the Pacific Ocean, which are channeled through San Bruno into the bay. This worked to exacerbate the fire. Until it is completely extinguished, the danger of further destruction will remain.

The blast was so strong it could be heard and felt miles away. When reports of a fireball rising 80-100 feet in the air began to pour into call centers, officials surveyed the site and initially believed an errant plane from the airport had crashed into the city—a testament to the scale of the explosion.

Six different fire departments quickly provided over 200 firemen to battle the blaze through the night, but their efforts were limited by the intensity of the heat, which reportedly melted tail lights on cars parked blocks away. “The radiant heat from the actual gas and the fireball was making it so that they couldn’t even attack the homes that were on fire,” said news photographer Bryan Carmody, who arrived shortly after the blast.

Although the explosion originated in the main gas line, the ensuing fire developed along several lesser gas pipes connecting to neighborhood homes. An overhead view of the scene revealed several large self-sustaining gas fires throughout the zone. San Bruno Fire Chief Dennis Haag explained in a news conference on Friday that each gas line had to be shut down. Visibly shaken, he described areas the fire had ravaged as a “moonscape.”

Complicating the effort to combat the fire, water pressure in the area was low because the fire destroyed a critical water main, compelling firefighters to truck in water.

Appearing for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is currently out of state, Lieutenant Governor Abel Maldonado declared a state of emergency. The National Transportation Safety Board has launched an investigation.

The ruptured natural gas line was owned, operated and maintained by Pacific Gas and Electric Corp. (PG&E), one of the largest natural gas and electric utilities in the United States. The company provides gas and electricity to approximately 15 million people throughout a 70,000-square-mile area in northern California reaching from Eureka in the north to Bakersfield in the south, and from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Sierra Nevada in the east. This includes 42,141 miles of natural gas distribution pipelines and 4.3 million natural gas customers.

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Since the blast, the company has maintained a very careful public relations posture, saying and publishing as little as possible about what caused such a horrible accident.

However, area residents say they had complained to PG&E of a possible gas leak for weeks, but that the utility had apparently done nothing about it, according to several media accounts.

Neighborhood resident Tim Guiterrez told reporters he called PG&E about a distinct smell of gas that had been present for three weeks. “Every day after work, I would smell the heavy smell coming from the gutter and sewer,” he said. According to Guiterrez, a company representative arrived in the neighborhood a week prior to the explosion and told people to shut their garage doors and stay inside as they investigated.

Within hours of the explosion, PG&E President Chris Johns issued a terse e-mail statement to the press declaring “if it is ultimately determined that we were responsible for the cause of the incident, we will take accountability.” The following morning, as houses still smoldered and families scrambled to find their loved ones, Johns held a brief press conference. Referring to revelations of the prior complaints of a gas leak, Johns said, “Right now, we haven’t got confirmation about that … we will report back as soon as we know something.”

While the cause of the ruptured gas line and explosion is not yet clear, over the last year PG&E has been carrying out an intensive cost-cutting campaign, reducing its workforce by installing “smart meters” in homes throughout Northern California.

Unlike the old meters which required regular inspection by PG&E technicians, the smart meters report household energy consumption directly to the company’s billing office, slashing the number of technicians on the ground that previously monitored gas and electricity issues in California neighborhoods.

There is also the question of the integrity of the gas pipeline itself. How often was it inspected? Did federal or state regulators in any way enforce maintenance and inspections?

The San Bruno explosion is the latest in a series of disasters—the recent fires in Detroit caused by a decrepit power grid, the BP Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, the Upper Big Branch mine disaster in West Virginia—that indicate the advanced decay of US infrastructure, the complete failure of “deregulation” to protect the population, and the reckless greed of the corporate elite.

The United States is a highly developed mass society with a complex infrastructure that can only be maintained by a significant expenditure of resources. This has become completely incompatible with capitalism. In this sense, the explosion of the San Bruno neighborhood is not an isolated event. It is of a piece with a host of festering and extremely dangerous infrastructure problems throughout the nation which have been exacerbated by the economic crisis.

A neighborhood’s transformation to rubble and ash in a mere 24 hours stands as a stark reminder: the maintenance and delivery of energy and every other socially necessary service has become far too important and potentially dangerous to be left in the hands of profit-mad corporations.

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