

US: Three natural gas explosions, one fatal, in Ohio-Pennsylvania area

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A natural gas explosion in Allentown, Pennsylvania, which killed five and damaged or destroyed scores of buildings last week, is just one of several such deadly incidents in the recent period.

The day after the explosion in the residential Allentown neighborhood, a massive explosion shook eastern Ohio's Columbiana County. The blast site was in the rural town of Hanoverton. No one was injured, but the resulting fireball could be seen for miles around. Residents of Wilkshire Hills, some 25 miles away, reported seeing the flame.

Just two weeks before the fatal Allentown blast, on January 24, overpressurized gas pipes caused an explosion and fire that damaged close to 20 homes in Fairport Harbor, Ohio, near Cleveland, causing the evacuation of the entire village. While no one was injured in this particular incident, such events point to the enormous possibility for disaster in the gas pipeline infrastructure.

In another incident two days later, a house exploded in Horseheads, New York, in Chemung County, killing a toddler and injuring two others.

In a public statement Chris Kozak, a spokesman for Columbia Gas in Toledo, Ohio, pointed out that a large number of major and interstate gas lines pass through the Ohio area. He said that if one of those lines goes down or explodes "an entire community could be destroyed." He said that the old-style steel pipes, like the ones in Allentown, are not able to handle the "thaw and freeze or the ebb and flow of the ground" as well as the new-style flexible pipes, which are made of plastic and are less likely to crack.

The Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission is currently conducting an investigation into the source of the explosion in Allentown. Cameras were snaked into the 83-year-old, 12-inch gas main to find evidence of

cracks in the walls of the steel pipe. Early on Tuesday, a four-foot-long section of cast-iron pipe suspected of causing the blast was removed and sent to an engineering firm in New Jersey for analysis. Another section of pipe is being removed for forensic study.

After visiting the excavation site, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett said, "The pipeline here, in Philadelphia, and everywhere in Pennsylvania is old and we need to start to take a look at that." He said that the state needed to think about its aging gas, water and sewer lines. At the same time, he admitted that cuts in the federal and state budgets could limit any large-scale examination of infrastructure.

However, a large-scale examination of infrastructure, i.e., a serious and in-depth emergency investigation and upgrading of the gas delivery infrastructure, is precisely what is required. The lack of regulation of the private companies who control public utilities for profit has led to a state of affairs where the natural gas pipelines that service the entire country are old, outdated and decaying.

The devastating blast in the California neighborhood of San Bruno last September brought to light a disgraceful and corrupt system run by utility giant Pacific Gas and Electric Corp. (PG&E), in which public funds designated for the upgrading of the dangerously decayed gas pipelines were pocketed by the company. Residents had been complaining of a strong smell of gas for weeks before the fatal explosion.

Rick Kessler, vice president of the watchdog group Pipeline Safety Trust, commented on the revelations at the time, "If this was the FAA and air travel we were talking about, I wouldn't get on a plane." Obviously, natural gas customers don't have the luxury of such a choice.

Speaking about the Pennsylvania blast, Kessler made

the point that cast-iron pipe is a vestige of an earlier era. The federal Pipeline Safety Improvement Act of 2002 envisions its replacement with safer materials, such as steel. He said Pennsylvania might have the most cast-iron gas lines in use.

“Think about the things in your daily life that are made of cast iron, besides a frying pan,” said Kessler. “We should always be concerned when we have pipes dating back a century, made of materials that may have been state-of-the-art at the time, and really aren’t.”

The Pipeline Safety Improvement Act, enacted by the federal government in December 2002, specified that natural gas pipeline operators be required to adopt “integrity management programs” and to identify “high-consequence areas” (HCAs) by December 17, 2004, and that all pipeline segments must be inspected and remediated by December 17, 2008.

The recent events have shown this law to be toothless. Governmental regulation in the utility industry at both the federal and state levels focuses on protecting private utilities’ profit margins, not on protecting the interests of their customers. Since last September’s deadly blast in San Bruno, gas explosions have occurred all over the country:

- September 9, 2010—San Bruno, California—8 deaths, 52 injuries, 50 homes destroyed
- December 29, 2010—Wayne, Michigan—2 deaths, 3 injuries
- January 18, 2011—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—1 death, 3 injured
- January 24, 2011—Fairport Harbor, Ohio—20 homes damaged
- January 26, 2011—Horseheads, New York—1 death, 2 injured, 1 home destroyed
- February 9—Allentown, Pennsylvania—5 deaths, 47 homes and properties damaged and destroyed
- February 10—Hanoverton, Ohio—brush fire

The list serves as a damning indictment of the lack of resources invested into basic infrastructure by both governmental and corporate bodies responsible, as well as a warning that such deadly events will continue.



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