

Corporate gas leak in California's Aliso Canyon to continue for months

David Brown
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This Sunday, state regulators ordered the Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas) to permanently close the natural gas well responsible for the largest methane leak in US history. The leak began on October 23, 2015, and has continued unabated until now, releasing the equivalent of 2.1 million metric tons of carbon dioxide and forcing thousands of local families to relocate. The leak is not expected to be stopped until the end of March.

The leak at the SoCalGas Aliso Canyon underground storage facility was caused by the failure of antiquated infrastructure and completely inadequate maintenance and inspection. The leak began last October with a rupture in a well casing, which was drilled in 1959, causing methane to seep up through the soil into the neighboring Porter Ranch, a suburb of Los Angeles. Roughly 4,500 families so far have evacuated the area to avoid the leak.

An aerial survey of the area carried out by UC Davis scientist Stephen Conley showed methane levels of 50 parts per million in November. Conley told the *Los Angeles Times* "this is probably 20 times bigger than anything else we've measured."

Natural gas which is primarily composed of methane is not considered toxic or dangerous when it is able to dissipate, but some of the chemicals associated with it are. Natural gas is mixed with an odorant to make it smell like rotten eggs to warn people of leaks in their homes. The current large-scale leak is causing some residents to suffer difficulty breathing, dizziness, headaches, nosebleeds and vomiting.

Natural gas, particularly that produced by hydraulic fracturing, can also contain benzene, a toxic carcinogen.

A leak of this size will inevitably have an impact on global warming. Methane is roughly 84 times more

effective at trapping energy over a period of 20 years than is carbon dioxide. After 100 years, methane remains 25 times more potent. At its high point in December, the leak rate peaked at 58,000 kg per hour, or the emissions equivalent of about 900 cars driving for a year, every hour.

SoCalGas has played a criminal role in their failure to maintain their facilities and in their delays in dealing with the leak. In 2014, SoCalGas submitted a request to state regulators to raise their rates, ostensibly to pay for comprehensive inspections of 229 storage wells. The report listed 26 of their wells as "high risk" entities that should be abandoned. It is unclear whether the Aliso Canyon well that broke was one of those.

It is clear is that SoCalGas knew of significant risks in their equipment and, rather than fix them, tried to use them to blackmail workers into paying higher rates. SoCalGas is a subsidiary of Sempra Energy which made \$1.2 billion in profit in 2014. The amount the company sought in increased rates over the next six years was \$180 million, about 2.5 percent of their expected yearly profits.

Despite knowing that their well lacked many modern safety features, like a shutoff valve at the base, SoCalGas continued to cut corners and use the injection well in a risky manner. Most wells consist of a metal casing surrounding a narrower metal tube, and SoCalGas was using the casing itself to inject natural gas, not just the internal tube, raising the risk of a leak.

After the leak was initially discovered on October 23, SoCalGas denied its existence to the public until five days later and did not start drilling a relief well until December 4, six weeks after the leak began. Instead they made six attempts in November to block the well with mud and brine which failed and may have actually increased the leak rate. The first relief well is expected

to be finished by February 24, with a second well planned, eventually allowing the leaking well to be capped by the end of March.

This is not the first disaster coming from California's natural gas infrastructure. In 2010 pipes owned by Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) exploded in San Bruno, killing eight people, injuring 60 and destroying or damaging 161 homes. For years before the 2010 disaster, PG&E demanded and received rate hikes in 2007 and 2009 to pay for maintenance, yet long stretches of antiquated pipes in residential areas were left untouched, leading to the explosion.

More recently, PG&E received \$2.37 billion in rate hikes spread out over three years from state regulators last August to pay for "maintenance." PG&E's profit in 2014 was nearly \$2 billion dollars, and there is no reason to believe that this new profit will be used for maintenance any more than their current profit is.

The government response to these companies' reckless threats and negligence has been complete acquiescence. Rate hikes are approved for companies already making large profits, infrastructure is left uninspected, and when it does collapse, government fines are barely even a slap on the wrist. Under current laws, SoCalGas faces a maximum fine of \$25,000 for the Aliso Canyon leak.



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