

Health officials: Porter Ranch gas leak may cause long-term health effects

By Sarah Favot, Los Angeles Daily News

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In this Nov. 6, 2015 photo, SoCalGas crews and outside experts started the coiled tubing rig operation to attempt to work through an ice blockage inside the 2 7/8-inch tubing pipeline of a natural gas storage well at the Aliso Canyon facility. Courtesy of SoCalGas

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, left, accompanied by SoCalGas President and CEO Dennis Arriola, center, and SoCalGas COO Bret Lane, as they visit the Aliso Canyon facility in Porter Ranch on Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2015, to look at



drilling of a relief well to stem a gas leak at an adjacent well in an underground storage field. Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times via AP/Pool

County public health officials said prolonged exposure to trace chemicals, some of which are known carcinogens, in [natural gas leaking above Porter Ranch](#) can cause long-term health effects.

However, they cautioned Wednesday that the levels examined so far in Porter Ranch are not believed to be associated with long-term health problems.

Previously, county health officials said the gas leak did not pose any long-term health risks, but because the leak is now entering its sixth week and gas company officials say it [may take four months to plug the leak](#), officials said more monitoring is needed.

“As the duration of exposure increases, these trace levels can produce significant long-term health effects,” county Department of Public Health Interim Director Cynthia Harding wrote in a memo sent Tuesday to the Board of Supervisors. “As this incident has moved from a short-term exposure event resolved within days, to now a long-term event potentially lasting months, supplemental monitoring of potentially harmful trace chemicals is warranted.”

The memo was sent in response to a question from Supervisor Michael Antonovich about the health impacts of the gas leak at the Aliso Canyon storage facility in the Santa Susana Mountains. Antonovich’s office provided a copy of the memo to this news organization Wednesday.

“The department’s report is clear and its findings demand a heightened sense of urgency to resolve this problem, which is severely impacting our communities for the last 41 days,” Antonovich said in a statement.

Dr. Cyrus Rangan, director of toxicity for the Division of Environmental Health, said the levels of chemicals examined so far are not believed to result in long-term health risks.

“We still don’t believe anyone is going to get any long-term health effects based on what we know,” Rangan said in an interview.

But more monitoring is required, he said.

The chemical of greatest concern is benzene, a known human carcinogen.

“I wouldn’t be alarmed at the benzene levels at this point,” Rangan said. “It’s cause for doing more monitoring. It’s not cause for saying, ‘I gotta get out of here.’”

Radon gas, which may potentially be released during repair operations, is also a concern.

Radon, which naturally occurs in geologic formations, is also a human carcinogen and the leading cause of lung cancers in nonsmokers, Harding said.

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Rangan said sporadic exposure to benzene occurs each time people fill their car with gasoline. Sporadic exposure doesn’t pose long-term health risks.

He said tests so far have shown that the levels of benzene in the air are within the range expected in the Southern California basin due to exhaust from vehicles. If tests show a trend of elevated levels of the chemical over several weeks, that would be cause for concern, he said.

“We’re not even close to that, which is good,” Rangan said.

Other trace chemicals in natural gas include: hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, toluene, ethyl benzene and xylenes.

The Department of Public Health is working with regulatory agencies to assess exposures to these chemicals.

Public health officials will expand monitoring to include these chemicals at the storage facility and in the Porter Ranch community.

The short-term health effects of exposure to mercaptan — an additive that smells like rotten eggs and which is added to odorless natural gas to detect leaks — has caused hundreds of residents to leave their homes. The Department of Public Health ordered SoCal Gas to pay for residents’ relocation. [Nearly 300 families have left and about 1,100 households have made inquiries about leaving.](#)

On Tuesday, the supervisors sent a letter to Gov. Jerry Brown, asking him to use his executive authority to have the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources take immediate action to find a solution to the gas leak.

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