



NEWS



News Headlines 07/12/2019

- Good news from Trona town hall: Water is back on
- Trona town hall emphasizes resilience, recovery
- After Aliso Canyon, a gas pipeline exploded — and Californians lost \$1 billion
- Southern California receives new firefighting helicopters

Good news from Trona town hall: Water is back on

Garrett Berthold, Victorville Daily Press

Posted: July 11, 2019, 1:00 PM



1st District Supervisor Robert Lovingood speaks during a town hall meeting in Trona on Wednesday. San Bernardino County officials offered updates on earthquake recovery efforts by several county, state governments and utilities. [James Quigg, Daily Press]

TRONA — As she took her turn among the official speakers on Wednesday, the manager of the local water provider shared good news with local residents reeling from back-to-back earthquakes.

“You have water today. I am very happy to report that,” said Audrey Schuyler, manager of the Searles Valley Domestic Water Co., referring to all nearby communities, except one, which would have water that afternoon.

Despite a heavy showing of county and state officials at a county-organized town hall Wednesday, the crowd cheered the loudest for Schuyler. The water company is one of the few official resources locals have in their small unincorporated community, located about 130 miles north of the City of San Bernardino.

The gathering inside the Trona High School gymnasium was aimed at informing local residents on recovery efforts. Several hundred residents and nearly 20 county and state officials attended, including 1st District Supervisor Robert Lovingood and 33rd District Assemblyman Jay Obernolte.

Running water is among the last remaining services locals are awaiting as they continue the process of checking for structural damage to their houses and await a sense of normalcy to return to their small desert community.

Almost a week ago, the last of two earthquakes struck nearby, a magnitude 7.1. The first quake, that hit on July 4, registered a magnitude 6.4.

In the home of Krystal and Dan, who did not wish to give their last name, the quakes broke two television sets and caused minor plumbing and exterior damage. Dan said it was a big relief to him and his neighbors to once again have water.

“The worst is over,” Dan said.

As Krystal shuffled paperwork on Rubbermaid fold-out tables inside the gymnasium after the speakers left, the couple said the return of water, plus showers and pallets of free water outside, gave them hope.

“The TV broke,” Krystal said. “The house is still standing.”

Despite water service being restored in Trona, Schuyler said a water boiling order was still in effect until an unspecified date.

But Dan said the quality of the water, which he said was poor even before the earthquakes, remains an issue.

“I wouldn’t serve as a glass of this water to my worst enemy,” he said.

Until the boil order is lifted, bottled water and water trucks will remain on hand with clean water that can be filled into five-gallon jugs. Showers are also available inside shower trailers outside Trona High School, including a handicap accessible stall.

“Just bear with us as we work through this,” Schuyler told residents seated in the gymnasium. “And I just want to let the Trona community know, you are strong and you are awesome.”

<https://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20190711/good-news-from-trona-town-hall-water-is-back-on>

Trona town hall emphasizes resilience, recovery

Jessica Weston, Ridgecrest Daily Independent

Posted: July 11, 2019



A crowd of Trona residents gather at the Trona High School Gym on Wednesday for a town hall update on the status of their home town following a pair of massive earthquakes last week. While a boil notice remains in effect, water had been restored to most parts of the Searles Valley communities. – Jack Barnell/Daily Independent

A Town Hall meeting in Trona Wednesday morning emphasized resilience and recovery.

Hundreds of people turned up for the meeting at Trona High School Wednesday morning. Trona fared worse than Ridgecrest during the 6.4 and 7.1 magnitude earthquakes on July 4 and 5 respectively. Emphasizing the magnitude of the disaster and the disruption of services was where the line of porta-potties, portable showers (including a wheelchair accessible one) and many pallets of bottled water outside the high school gym where the town hall took place. After the meeting, food was served by Casa Corona of Ridgecrest and the gym was turned into a local assistance center.

In addition to information from State Senator Shannon Grove, the Town Hall included input from Assemblyman Jay Obernolte, the California Office of Emergency Services, the California Department of Transportation, the California Department of Insurance, the American Red Cross, the San Bernardino County of Board of Supervisors, San Bernardino County Sheriff and **County Fire** Department, San Bernardino County Land Use Services, Public Works & Public Health, Pacific Gas & Electric and representatives from the offices Congressman Kevin McCarthy, Congressman Paul Cook, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Senator Kamala Harris.

“First responders are still assessing damages, but I am confident that our communities will rebuild and come out even stronger,” Grove said.

Schuyler: ‘I don’t have an office. It was red-tagged yesterday’

Searles Domestic Water Company manager Audrey Schuyler reported that at that time water had been partially restored. She asked people to report water leaks to 760-272-2291. She said the phone may be the best way to communicate the information.

“Right now I don’t have an office. It was red-tagged yesterday,” she said.

<http://www.sbcounty.gov/main/default.aspx> will also have updated information, or people can call San Bernardino County at 877-410-8829 for county services or to find out where to get resources.

San Bernardino Building Official Jack Leonard gave a building safety update.

Leonard said the building inspector has been working very closely with the fire marshal's office performing detailed damage assessments. Red-tagged buildings are deemed unsafe, yellow means temporary or limited use, green indicates cleared for occupancy.

Leonard said 100 structures had been inspected and of these approximately five commercial and eight residential buildings had been red-tagged. As of Wednesday, inspections were 75 percent complete. He said the hope is to have inspections completed by the end of the week.

Leonard encouraged people to reach out for damage assessments if they need to. "As you return to your house or business, if you don't see a placard you can call us and we will be happy to provide that damage assessment for you," he said.

A representative from PG&E gave an update on infrastructure.

He reported that in all about 180 leaks had been discovered between Trona and Ridgecrest.

He said that the first order of business after the first earthquake hit was the high-pressure transmission lines running across the desert which are also the main feeds for Trona and Ridgecrest.

"We patrolled those lines and we did discover some pretty large ground fractures across our pipelines," he said.

He said a stress level assessment on the lines ultimately indicated that they were safe to operate and that some sections will probably be replaced.

He said PG&E brought in liquid natural gas so there will probably be no loss of gas service.

He said that PG&E will be doing overhead flights looking for ground movements that need to be assessed.

The rep added that, "Our assessments show there was more damage in Trona than in Ridgecrest."

All high-priority leaks have been repaired, although as of Wednesday there were still some ground fractures.

People who have had their gas shut off are asked not to turn it on themselves, but to call 800-743-5000 or 800-PGE-5000 to have it hooked up again.

If anyone smells gas, they are asked to leave the building, do not turn any light switches and call 911.

Jennifer Kuzak from SCE public affairs reported that, "our crew has worked very hard to get power restored to the majority of customers within 24 or 48 hours" although as of Wednesday morning SCE was still working on individual properties.

Southern California Edison can be reached at 800-655-4555.

Dutton: ‘You guys know how to throw a Fourth of July party’

The mood throughout was largely good-humored, leading many present to remark on the resiliency of the Trona people.

“You guys really know how to throw a Fourth of July party, don’t you?” joked San Bernardino County Assessor Bob Dutton.

Speaking seriously, Dutton reminded everyone that there are provisions in law to allow property values to be lowered in the case of hardship. He urged everyone to make applications and file a request.

“It has truly been catastrophic,” said Jeff Toney from Cal OES. A minute later, he made a joke.

“For all your DMV needs, right now no lines,” he said, leading to laughter from the crowd.

Local agencies are constantly patrolling the streets of the Trona area for stray or lost animals, which are being taken to the Ridgecrest Animal Shelter. People are asked to call San Bernardino Animal Care and Control at 800-472-5609 for more information.

In other information, the cooling center at the library in Trona has been opened.

Georgia Duncan from the American Red Cross noted that the Red Cross will be in the area for as long as needed and can be contacted at 1-800-REDCROSS.

Damage assessments were scheduled for later in the week to verify the information and determine what forms of aid Trona can obtain.

In response to a question about burned out and abandoned properties in the area, San Bernardino Fire Marshall Mike Horton replied, “I am working very closely with code enforcement and the building official and we have a very long list of condemned buildings or derelict buildings that are going to be removed and we are in that process now.”

These structures have been an issue to the residents of the Trona area for years and the announcement was met with wild applause and cheers.

“We will see great improvement in that in the upcoming months, be patient with us,” Horton added. He asked people report buildings of concern to code enforcement or to the fire marshall at 909-386-8400.

‘Why did it take three days for any help to get to us?’

One question from the public reflected the frustration at the perceived length of time for an emergency response to take place.

“Why did it take three days for any help to get to us?” someone asked on a submitted question.

San Bernardino Supervisor Robert Lovingood fielded that one.

“From the time it happened, there were things being taken care of. It can never be quick enough,” he said. “Road crews, power, water, Searles Valley, we have been in contact with them the entire time.”

Lovinggood added that he recognized the frustration of the events he called “a national tragedy.”

“I am not here to make excuses, every resource was applied to move forward. It’s never fast enough I understand the frustration,” he said.

In other news, the post office in Trona is closed until further notice. People are reportedly being asked to forward mail to other addresses.

<https://www.ridgecrestca.com/news/20190711/trona-town-hall-emphasizes-resilience-recovery>

After Aliso Canyon, a gas pipeline exploded — and Californians lost \$1 billion

Sammy Roth, Los Angeles Times

Posted: July 11, 2019, 4:00 AM



Repairs continue on Southern California Gas Co.'s Line 235, south of Barstow, Calif. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times) Newberry Springs photo **SBCoFD**

Two years after methane gas began leaking from Southern California Gas Co.’s Aliso Canyon storage field, one of the company’s key pipelines exploded, starting a fire in the desert and leaving a smoking crater in the ground.

Nobody was hurt, and the October 2017 explosion went largely unnoticed outside the energy industry.

But the damaged pipeline was taken out of service — severely constraining gas supplies in Southern California, especially with storage at Aliso Canyon restricted. Together, those infrastructure failures would fuel higher energy prices across the state, ultimately costing California ratepayers at least \$1 billion.

The 30-inch pipeline is still out of service, and Aliso Canyon remains restricted. Some experts are worried a heat wave could send prices soaring once again this summer.

“It’s been a mini energy crisis,” said Samuel Golding, a consultant who helps local governments launch their own power agencies.

Southern California Gas originally estimated that Line 235, which was built in 1957 and carries natural gas through the desert toward the Los Angeles Basin, would return to service in April 2019. That 18-month turnaround would have been lengthy compared to recent pipeline outages in other parts of the country, which have been repaired in weeks or months.

But April came and went with no resolution.

“People have gotten married, conceived, had babies, baptized them since that pipeline has been out,” said Issam Najm, president of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council, at a public workshop in January.

Najm became one of the gas company's loudest critics after the months-long Aliso Canyon blowout, which led thousands of residents of L.A.'s Porter Ranch neighborhood to flee their homes after experiencing nosebleeds, nausea and headaches, and prompted firefighters to sue SoCalGas over exposure to carcinogens. The record-setting leak followed another high-profile failure on California's gas grid, the 2010 explosion of a Pacific Gas & Electric pipeline that killed eight people and destroyed 38 homes in San Bruno.

Clean energy advocates say those gas grid disasters — and now the extended pipeline outage — are ominous reminders that natural gas isn't necessarily the safe, reliable and affordable fuel its promoters make it out to be. Although those advocates want to see the pipelines fixed for safety and reliability, they say California should begin phasing out natural gas by retrofitting homes and businesses with electric heat pumps and replacing gas-fired power plants with solar panels, wind turbines and batteries.

"The last thing we should be doing is throwing more and more money at the gas system that we don't need to," said Matt Vespa, an attorney with the environmental group Earthjustice.

The California Public Utilities Commission is concerned, too. The agency opened an investigation last month into the safety culture of SoCalGas and its parent company, San Diego-based Sempra Energy, which also owns San Diego Gas & Electric. Utilities Commission staff cited the Aliso Canyon blowout and the explosion on Line 235, writing that these incidents raise a "very serious question about whether the leadership, organizational culture and governance" at SoCalGas and Sempra prioritize safety.

What's taking so long?

SoCalGas officials say they've been working diligently to restore Line 235.

Rodger Schwecke, the company's senior vice president for gas operations and construction, attributed the lengthy repair process to the remote desert terrain, and to environmental rules imposed by state regulators.

It's not easy replacing several miles of buried pipe far from major population centers, where summer can bring punishing heat, and winter can bring freezing temperatures and even snow. Gas company employees and contractors must drive no faster than 10 miles per hour down rough, narrow dirt roads to avoid harming desert tortoises and other at-risk species, and they must be led at all times by a biologist on the lookout for wildlife. Workers have been pulling 12-hour days, with crews on site six to seven days a week, Schwecke said.

The initial work on Line 235 was completed months ago. But SoCalGas has found new leaks in the pipeline every time they've flowed gas through it, prompting new inspections and repairs. The problems stem from corrosive desert soil, Schwecke said.

"We're doing everything we can to make sure those pipelines come back as safe as possible," he said.

The gas company estimates the pipeline will return to service by July 21 — assuming no more leaks are found.

But critics say SoCalGas could have moved faster.

The gas company applied for a key environmental permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife in July 2018 — three months after a "root cause analysis" of the pipeline's failure was completed, and 10 months after the explosion. Then the company and state wildlife officials spent more than a month discussing

the permit fee, which the state agency characterized as SoCalGas “disputing CDFW request for appropriate fees.” The parties spent another six weeks debating proposed environmental measures.

The permit was finalized in January 2019, allowing SoCalGas to work in desert streambeds.

State Sen. Henry Stern (D-Canoga Park) questioned the gas company’s actions at a hearing in March, saying the streambed permit “sat on SoCalGas’s desk signed, ready to be inked for months, and wasn’t.”

“I have significant concerns about whether or not the delays in that project repair were willful or not, and the cost to Southern California ratepayers from that delay,” Stern said.

Stern and other skeptics have wondered whether SoCalGas is purposefully slow-walking the pipeline repairs, possibly to create pressure on state officials to fully reopen Aliso Canyon. Natural gas storage at the facility has been restricted by the Public Utilities Commission since the 2015 blowout, and the commission is studying whether the facility can be shut down entirely.

The gas company has pushed back against the restrictions, saying officials could help stabilize energy prices by allowing more gas to be stored at Aliso. Oil and gas regulators at the state’s Department of Conservation have determined that Aliso could safely hold twice as much gas as is currently allowed by the Public Utilities Commission.

“Our system was built around storage assets. And when you have these pipeline outages, that just highlights the importance of storage,” Schwecke said.

Critics say SoCalGas has a financial interest in getting the storage facility up and running again.

Aliso Canyon had a net book value of \$724 million at the end of 2018, according to financial filings by Sempra Energy. As long as the facility remains in operation, SoCalGas customers will ultimately be on the hook to pay off the company’s investment, plus annual profits for shareholders. Before the methane leak, SoCalGas also sold storage space to large gas users, a program that earned shareholders up to \$20 million annually.

Schwecke said he’s “personally offended” by the suggestion the gas company may be slow-walking the pipeline repairs, calling the speculation “irresponsible” and “absolutely not true.” He described the environmental permitting process as relatively quick, blaming the delays in part on state wildlife officials who “wanted to expand their authority into non-streambed areas.”

He also pointed out that the gas company has proposed to permanently stop selling storage space at Aliso and other facilities to large gas users.

“We get tired of people saying we’re doing this for the money, because we’re not,” Schwecke said.

Asked about the Public Utilities Commission’s investigation into the safety culture of SoCalGas and Sempra, gas company spokeswoman Christine Detz said in an email that safety is “not just part of our culture, it is the foundation that has helped our business thrive for more than 150 years.”

Detz also rejected environmentalists' suggestion that the gas grid is unsafe, saying that natural gas "is among the safest, most reliable and affordable forms of energy available," and that gas infrastructure is "among the most resilient forms of energy during emergencies, including recent wildfires and earthquakes."

Counting the costs

Line 235 exploded on Oct. 1, 2017, igniting a five-acre fire near Newberry Springs, destroying heavy equipment and damaging a nearby pipe, Line 4000. A crew of gas company employees and contractors working on Line 4000 fled before the explosion.

"If it had happened in the L.A. Basin, that would have been a San Bruno," said Jim Caldwell, a former assistant general manager at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, referring to the deadly explosion of a PG&E gas pipeline in 2010.

SoCalGas reduced the gas flow on Line 4000 as a safety precaution, because it runs through the same corrosive desert soil as Line 235 and was built just a few years later. The company had previously stopped flowing gas through another 1950s-era desert pipeline, Line 3000, after finding external corrosion and several non-hazardous leaks. The company eventually brought Line 3000 back into service with a reduced flow.

The loss of capacity on those pipelines, layered on top of the Aliso Canyon restrictions, has rippled across the state over the last two years.

The effects were most dramatic during a heat wave last July and August, which caused homes and businesses to crank up their air conditioning. Gas prices surged to \$40 per million BTU, after never exceeding \$4 in 2016.

The price increases quickly spread to the electricity market, as gas-fired power plants paid more for their fuel. Those gas plants charged more for electricity, forcing electric utilities statewide to pay prices that at one point exceeded \$250 per megawatt-hour, more than double the previous year's high.

The money likely ended up in the hands of gas-fired electric generators with low operating costs, as well as gas traders who held rights to the limited capacity on the SoCalGas pipeline system, experts say.

Southern California Edison took the biggest hit, telling state regulators it spent \$850 million more than expected on electricity in 2018. The company attributed a "substantial majority" of the unexpected costs to higher-than-expected natural gas prices.

Edison customers are now paying those costs through higher electric bills, as are former Edison customers who departed the utility earlier this year for Clean Power Alliance, a government-run energy provider formed by 31 city and county governments.

The Public Utilities Commission estimated that the combined effects of the Aliso Canyon restrictions and the pipeline outages cost Southern California ratepayers nearly \$600 million in 2018, and Northern California ratepayers more than \$300 million.

Those numbers are likely an underestimate, the commission said. And they only cover the costs to homes and businesses on the state's main power grid, which doesn't include Los Angeles and other cities that operate their own electrical systems.

Higher electricity prices haven't been limited to California, said Fred Heutte, a senior policy associate at the Northwest Energy Coalition. That's because California trades power with other western states.

"As soon as the price spike hits on the power side, everybody across the entire West will see it. Maybe not as much, but they'll see some effect," Heutte said.

In the Coachella Valley, the price increases caused Palm Springs and two other cities to delay the launch of a government-run power provider called Desert Community Energy, out of concern the new agency would fall into a deep financial hole before it could build up cash reserves.

In Long Beach, which runs its own gas utility but depends on SoCalGas for delivery and storage, gas prices more than doubled during a cold snap in December. Some residents were stunned when they saw their bills.

The impacts continued into February 2019, when unseasonably cold weather brought snow to Malibu and West Hollywood.

The overall cost of providing electricity on the state's main power grid was \$2.7 billion in the first quarter of 2019, according to the California Independent System Operator, up from \$1.9 billion during the same period last year — a 42% increase. The grid operator said increased natural gas prices were mostly to blame, with supply restrictions in Southern California one of several factors.

'We really have to shore up these pipelines'

Some critics say the Public Utilities Commission has moved too slowly to solve the problems on the gas grid.

Golding, who runs the consultancy Community Choice Partners, said the regulatory agency should have intervened last August, when Edison reported that its electricity costs were rising dramatically.

The commission could have limited the penalties that gas-fired power plants are charged by SoCalGas when they use more fuel than expected, which likely played a significant role in driving up gas and electric prices, Golding said. Or the commission could have eased the restrictions on Aliso Canyon.

"Their inaction cost California billions, probably raised carbon emissions and plunged the entire Western grid into a protracted reliability emergency," Golding said.

Ed Randolph, who leads the Public Utilities Commission's energy division, said agency staff has pushed SoCalGas to speed up work on Line 235. Earlier this month, agency staff also proposed allowing SoCalGas to withdraw fuel from Aliso Canyon more frequently, citing the pipeline outages and last year's high energy costs. While the commission has yet to rule on that proposal, last summer it increased the amount of gas that can be stored at Aliso by nearly 40%, mentioning the continued outage on Line 235 as one of the reasons.

"We do have a huge sense of urgency around this," Randolph said.

While greater use of Aliso Canyon could limit future price increases, some experts see the gas company's pipelines as the underlying problem.

The huge amount of storage at Aliso "has masked infrastructure issues in the past," said Rod Walker, a Georgia-based consultant who is studying the reliability of California's gas grid for the state's Energy Commission. If state officials ultimately decide to shut down the storage field — an outcome that Gov. Gavin

Newsom said he was “fully committed” to during last year’s campaign for governor — it will become even more important for SoCalGas to operate the rest of its system safely and reliably, Walker said.

“We really have to shore up these pipelines,” Walker said.

SoCalGas will bring Line 235 back into service with reduced gas flow while the company develops long-term plans for its ailing desert pipes. And once Line 235 is back, the company plans to shut down and run tests on Line 4000, which has also experienced leaks related to external corrosion. That means gas supply constraints similar to last summer’s could continue for months.

Even with pipeline capacity still limited, experts say it’s hard to predict if electricity prices will skyrocket again this summer. There are too many variables, including weather and energy demand, not just in California but in other western states.

One factor that might help: Above-average snowpack across much of the West means there should be plenty of cheap hydropower available as temperatures rise. The Public Utilities Commission also recently approved a proposal from Edison to cap the penalties that gas-fired power plants pay to SoCalGas when they use more fuel than expected.

Although SoCalGas is skeptical the penalty cap will help, Edison estimates the change would save ratepayers at least \$200 million under conditions similar to last summer.

<https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-aliso-canyon-gas-pipeline-explosion-20190711-story.html>

Southern California receives new firefighting helicopters

Staff Writer, AirMed&Rescue

Posted: July 12, 2019



The Coulson UH60 Helitanker, The OCFA is currently deploying a Helitanker series aircraft in its firefighting pilot program. Photo: Coulson Aviation

New aerial firefighting equipment has been deployed in Southern California in the US with the addition of two new helicopters to the Orange County Fire Authority’s (OCFA) fleet

The two helicopters work in collaboration with one another: one, which has the capacity to carry 1,000 gallons (typical OCFA helicopters can carry around 300 gallons) and can fill its tank while in flight, will perform the water drops, and the other works as the reconnaissance aircraft, tracking the location of water drops precisely and measuring their effectiveness.

The program, which is funded by Southern California Edison, is still in its pilot stage. Once operational, the two aircraft, which have been leased from Coulson Aviation, are to be manned 24/7 and will serve all regions serviced by Southern California Edison. These include Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

“Flying at night is not new, hover-filling at night is new and hover-filling with a large helitanker is brand new,” said OCFA Chief Brian Fennessy.

Fennessy explained that the conditions for firefighting at night are preferable: with lowered temperatures, increased humidity and less wind, it’s the ideal time to battle the blazes. “For the pilots there are less aircraft in the air, less radio traffic,” he added. And the addition of military-standard night vision goggles and infrared technology will enable aerial firefighting flight crew to see at night while combatting the fires.

The demand for aerial firefighting capabilities is increasing across the globe, and new approaches to the challenges of payload, navigation and fire management are a welcome development. “The unprecedented scale of this fire threat has been called the new normal,” commented Chris Thompson of Southern California Edison. “We want to ensure the safety of this region.”

<https://www.airmedandrescue.com/story/113699/southern-california-receives-new-firefighting-helicopters>