

Massive California gas leak provokes anger

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Infrared image released by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) shows methane gas leaking from the the Southern California Gas Company's (SoCalGas) Aliso Canyon site near the Porter Ranch suburb of Los Angeles

For several weeks, Sam Mongeau's three-year-old daughter Bella has had a lingering cough, while other members of his family have experienced nose bleeds, headaches and fatigue.

Mongeau, 40, blames it all on a massive gas leak near his home in Porter

Ranch, a sleepy middle-class community northwest of Los Angeles, where a state of emergency was declared by California's governor earlier this week.

"Everyone's been getting sick," Mongeau, a sales manager at an area auto dealership, told AFP.

"It's almost like you wake up every day from anesthesia, feeling groggy, tired."

The leak was detected on October 23 in an underground natural gas well at the Southern California Gas Company's (SoCalGas) Aliso Canyon site—one of the largest gas facilities in the United States.

The well sits about 8,700 feet (2,651 meters) underground, and the leak is thought to come from a broken pipe about 500 feet below the surface.

Repeated efforts to stop the leak by pumping liquid and mud down the well have failed, and the gas company is now drilling a relief well to intercept and plug the damaged well.

The operation is expected to take until late February or March.

'Get some fresh air'

That timeline is not soon enough for the area's 30,000 residents, many of whom say they are getting sick from the rotten-egg smell of the odorant put into the gas to help detect leaks.



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"I have been getting nausea and headaches," said Linda Noel, 50, as she waited outside a center set up by the gas company to assist area residents. "Everyone in the family has been to the doctor or to urgent care.

"All I want is to get out of here and get some fresh air."

Suna Najjar, 46, said she has been getting rashes on her neck and face, and her 12-year-old daughter regularly has nose bleeds.

"We are four in the family and they are offering to relocate us to one hotel room," she said. "You feel like this is totally out of your control and that you're at everyone's mercy."

More than 10,000 residents have so far been relocated by the gas company and hundreds more have asked to be moved. Two local elementary schools have shut down, and the students are being shuttled to other districts.



A resident (L) discusses her housing situation with a SoCal Gas employee at the SoCal Gas Community Resource Center in Porter Ranch, California

Meanwhile some 1,000 people have joined a class-action suit against SoCalGas, many encouraged by well-known environmental activist Erin Brockovich, who works for a legal firm and who has held several town meetings with residents.

Brockovich's story of taking on corporate America was made into a movie in 2000 that earned Julia Roberts an Oscar.

The gas company and health officials say the gas leaking from the facility poses not health risk. Experts however say the [environmental impact](#) will be significant, as methane is a [potent greenhouse gas](#).

The leak is spewing about 1,000 tons of methane a day, experts say, the equivalent to pollution produced daily by 4.5 million cars.

"To put this into perspective, the leak effectively doubles the (methane) emission rate for the entire Los Angeles basin," said Stephen Conley, a scientist at the University of California in Davis.

"On a global scale, this is big."

Michael Mizrahi, a spokesman for SoCalGas, said while the company fully realizes that the leak has disrupted the lives of local residents and will have an environmental impact, it was doing its utmost to remedy the situation and was closely monitoring air quality in Porter Ranch.

He said crews were working around the clock to stop the leak, which has cost SoCalGas \$50 million (46 million euros) so far.

"Everybody wants to call this an environmental disaster, I'm not going to use those words," he said. "We know this is a major incident and our goals are to continue to stop the leak and serve the community, period."

"We are doing the very best we can do."

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